

Environment and Politics : A Study

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, environmental problems have become a common phenomenon across the globe. It has become very difficult to overlook environmental issues. These problems cross boundaries of nation states to include issues like overuse of resources, ozone depletion, climate change, destruction of endangered species and overfishing in global waters. Problems like climate change and ozone layer depletion not only affect the lives and health of people, but touch every nation and community. Environment problem in one area can have impact over other parts of the world too since these problems are highly complex and interconnected, for example – air pollution in one region of Europe can be caused by activities in another area. Due to the heavy destruction inflicted on the environment through the human activities, an urgent need is felt to save and conserve it. This is the reason why environment is no longer viewed as a minor matter. Unless effective steps are taken, environmental problems will have long term effects on people and will end up destroying the future of Earth. Global efforts are required to solve various environmental problems.

Keywords: Global Efforts, Environmental Problems

I. INTRODUCTION

Environmental issues started getting importance during the later part of the 20th century with the rise of various environmental movements, environment related Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and political parties, publication of work on environmental issues and appearance of issues which were threat to the whole humankind – global warming, ozone layer depletion, climate change, which made the world realise seriousness of environmental issues and the need to act on them

collectively and globally. It started around 1960s with the publication of Rachel Carson's "*Silent Spring*" (1964) that brought to light the dreadful impact of Dichloro Diphenyl Trichloroethane (DDT) on bird population and Murray Bookchin's "*Our Synthetic Environment*" (1962). The first green party was established in New Zealand in 1972. Another successful well-known party, "*die Grünen*", was formed in West Germany in 1980. In United Kingdom (UK), Green Party came to existence in 1985.¹ This period experienced the rise of important Environmental NGOs like Greenpeace and Friends of

the Earth (FoEI). The Stockholm Conference or the "United Nations Conference on Human Environment" which took place in 1972 was the first major conference to solve the problems of environment by mutual agreement at universal level and led to the establishment of UN environmental framework, "United Nations Environmental Programme" (UNEP) for administration and direction of the framework. Since then, a number of international conferences on environment have been held, most of them under the leadership of United Nations (UN), which includes conferences like the Rio Summit of 1992, Kyoto conference of 1997, Johannesburg summit of 2002 and the latest being the Paris conference on climate change, 2015. These conferences brought the nations together to discuss the environmental issues. All these proceedings contributed to a new sphere of environmental studies, known as Environmental Politics, which seeks to study several new concepts, terminologies and debates associated with environment.

II. MEANING OF ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

The origin of the word environment can be traced back to the French word "*environer*" which means 'surroundings' or 'to surround'. Environment consists of atmosphere, lithosphere, hydrosphere and biosphere and refers to the material and forces that surround the organisms. Environment includes both biotic and abiotic elements, the former consists of living elements like animals, birds etc and the latter includes non living things like air, land, water etc.

The term 'Politics' has been defined differently by several thinkers. The term originated from the Greek word "*Polis*" meaning city state. Traditionally, the term has been associated with the study of state and the government. Harold Lasswell defined Politics as the study of shaping and sharing of power. On the other side, David Easton has defined it as the authoritative allocation of values. It is a systematic

body of knowledge which deals with government, protecting the rights of the citizens, safeguarding peace and harmony of human relations. Politics is also defined as cooperation between individuals and groups to secure values like liberty, equality and fraternity. It also includes the study of concept of power. So, overall there is no universal definition of politics.

According to Andrew Dobson, the awareness for environmental issues in 1960s – 1970s marked the beginning of Environmental Politics (Dobson, 2016, p. 16). However, the term gained popularity in the Nineties after the 1992 "United Nations Conference on Environment and Development," (UNCED) popularly known as Earth Summit which led to lot of research in the sphere of environmental change. The journal "*Environmental Politics*" was started in 1992. Another journal dealing with environmental issues titled "*Global Environmental Politics*," was started by Peter Dauvergne, Sharon Goad, Jennifer Clapp, Marian Miller, Karen Litfin and Paul Wapner in 2001 and dealt with contemporary environmental issues which contributed to the sphere of environmental politics. These journals were published by reputed publishers like the MIT Press and Cambridge University, which helped them to reach worldwide, across all universities, which enhanced and further strengthened the scope of environmental politics. Kate O'Neill argues that the study of environment in International Relations has brought many new things to its sphere. In her words "First, the emergence of the environment as an area of study in international relations theory has challenged many of the traditional assumptions of the discipline, bringing in new actors, new types of decision-making processes, rules and norms, and offering some potential for transforming the ways that global governance is done" (O' Neill, 2009, p. 210). She also offers a definition of Environmental Politics according to which it covers a huge "spectrum of perspectives, tools and approaches from various disciplines that help in explaining the

nature of global environmental crisis and offer possible solutions" and further adds that "many of these perspectives have their origin from the discipline of social sciences and from the world of practice and policymaking".²

According to Pamela Chasek, "Environmental Politics includes at least two important dimensions : the environmental consequences of the economic or other activity in question and the state and the non state actors involved".³

Paul Harris defines Environmental Politics as "an area of activity and practice, on one hand, and a field of research and study, on the other. It is about how governments, diplomats and other actors influence the global environment, which includes local and regional environments, and how what they do is analyzed and understood by scholars, students and activists".⁴

Environment Politics has been defined differently by various thinkers. It has been defined as a collection of perspectives that help in better understanding of the environmental problems and in offering solutions. Some define it as a realm where the interests of the states are pursued by using power and authority. Also, it includes the study of various actors involved in environmental decision making. Overall, it can be said that Environmental Politics is an area of study that deals with the role of several actors like International Organisations, NGOs, States in Environmental protection and its decision making. It deals with several debates related to the environment like the North- South divide over the environment and throws a light on various environmental problems like global warming, toxic pollution, climate change, nuclear waste disposal etc. Environmental Politics also focuses on various measures – domestic and external, taken by the states to overcome the challenges posed by the problem, as well as different

perspectives on environment and International Environmental Law (IEL).

III.ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

Various factors have been responsible for environmental degradation, like industrialization, urbanisation, deforestation, use of appliances and transportation, increasing water consumption, population growth. Population growth, which has led to exploitation of natural resources, has resulted in land and forest degradation, soil pollution, water scarcity, water pollution, danger to flora and fauna or biodiversity. The environmental issues range from a variety of problems like global warming, climate change, pollution, nuclear crisis, loss of biodiversity, deep-sea dumping, depletion of national parks and forests etc.

Depletion of Natural resources – Human activities like mining, fishing, deforestation, overconsumption, use of fossil fuels, have resulted in depletion of natural resources. Various varieties of flora and fauna have either become extinct or are in verge of extinction. Sandra Postel, who specializes in international freshwater issues, believes water scarcity to be the single largest threat to global food production.⁵ Deforestation has resulted in land degradation, loss of soil, siltation, reduction in water retention capacity and natural calamities like flood, as well as loss of biodiversity, as flora and fauna survive on forests for their existence.

Pollution – Pollution is a major environmental issue. It is a serious problem that does not respect boundaries and is of several kinds, like air pollution, water pollution and land pollution. Pollution in one part of the country can quickly travel to other countries. For example – air pollution due to nuclear radiations can spread to other countries too and end up affecting their resources. Similarly, water pollution can easily travel from one source to another.

- **Air pollution** - Air pollution is caused by several factors like burning of fossil fuels like coal and petrol which release sulphur dioxide (SO₂) into the air. It is also caused when gaseous pollutants like SO₂ and nitrogen oxide are mixed with the atmosphere. This type of pollution results in problems like respiratory diseases, slow mental development in children, eutrophication, acid rain, lead poisoning and depletion of the ozone layer.
- **Water pollution** - Water pollution is caused as a result of disposal of waste like toxic chemicals, pesticides, insecticides etc. from factories, oil-carrying vessels etc. It is not only concerned with the surface water but groundwater and oceans too.
- **Soil pollution** - Soil pollution has been a result of improper use of soil which led to loss of fertility, thereby resulting in soil depletion. The problem has been made worse by poor irrigation practices which have also resulted in issues like soil salinity and water logging.
- **Toxic pollution** - Use of toxic chemicals like mutagens, teratogens, irritants and teratogens by the industries is also a major cause of pollution. Such toxics when released into the environment can cause harm not only to the home country but the neighbouring countries too. They can pollute any source with which they come in contact with, like, water and soil.

Global Climate change - Climate change became a priority environment issue from the 1970s when the scientists began to discover increase in temperature of the Earth due to several factors, like increase in carbon dioxide. According to the "World Health Organisation" (WHO) Report of 2018, climate change is expected to cause some "250,000 additional deaths a year between the years 2030 and 2050" from diseases like diarrhea, malnutrition and Malaria ("WHO," 2018). Gases like CO₂, methane trap heat in the atmosphere and absorb the radiations from the Earth, keeping its temperature normal and enough to sustain life on earth. This is known as greenhouse effect,

without which the temperature of the Earth would have been much lower.⁶ Due to human activities like burning of fossil fuel and deforestation, the concentration of these gases has increased in the atmosphere, thereby resulting in warming up the earth. In the year 1988, the first Intergovernmental Conference on climate change in Toronto was held which led to the establishment of the "Intergovernmental Panel on Climate change" (IPCC), an inter-governmental scientific body to monitor climate change.⁷ The main responsibility of IPCC was to prepare "comprehensive reviews and recommendations with respect to the state of knowledge of the science of climate change; social and economic impact of climate change, possible response strategies and elements for inclusion in a possible future international convention on climate" ("IPCC," 2015). According to 2001 report of IPCC, the global temperature is expected to increase between "1.4 and 5.8 degrees by 2100" ("IPCC," 2001).

It is predicted that if the present rate of melting continues in Arctic, it would be completely free of ice by 2030.⁸ IPCC has predicted that by the year 2100, there will be an increase in the "average sea-level between 9 and 88 centimeters" ("IPCC," 2001). This will lead to flooding of many low-lying lands and will create millions of environmental refugees. Anttila-Hughes and Hsiang have related environmental changes with gender and stated that females are affected more by environmental changes than males. According to them, typhoons are responsible for "13 per cent of the total national infant mortality rate in the Philippines and that baby girls die 15 times more frequently post typhoons" whereas no increase in mortality rate was found for baby boys.⁹ Nations have come together to address the issue of climate change and take steps to tackle it, which resulted in agreements like the Kyoto protocol of 1997 and the Paris agreement of 2015. The agreements aim to tackle climate change by reducing the carbon emissions.

Ozone layer depletion – Ozone is a slightly bluish pungent gas and ninety percent of it resides in the stratosphere. The ozone layer protects the earth from the harmful ultraviolet (UV) rays of the sun by absorbing the radiation. These rays can cause diseases like cancer, eye damage, cataract, chest pain, difficulty in breathing and skin irritation. In plants, it affects their growth. During the 1970s, the scientists also discovered that the so called chlorofluocarbons (CFCs), which are man made chemicals used in refrigerators and air conditioners, can cause a huge harm to the stratospheric ozone layer.¹⁰ By the 1980s, scientists discovered thinning of the layer, especially over Antarctica. One of the reasons behind this thinning is the emitting of CFCs from electrical appliances like refrigerator. The Montreal Protocol of 1987 was the first agreement between the nations to curb the usage of CFCs. By 2005, there has been a 90-95 percent reduction in the use of ozone depleting chemicals in the countries that have the part of the agreement.¹¹

Nuclear power issues: The demand for nuclear power as a source of energy began in the United States of America (USA) during 1960s when Southern California Edison company decided to build a large facility at San Onofre, California, followed by a similar announcement by Pacific Gas and Electric. Nuclear power may have a high potential, but the radioactive waste generated from the nuclear power plants is one of the major environmental problems. On good side, nuclear power helps in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. However, it is a very expensive technology and dangerous one too, if not used carefully. Chernobyl tragedy and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in Japan have shown how nuclear waste has lead mankind to disaster. Also, there is a continuous threat of nations diverting their nuclear power to produce nuclear arsenal. Radiation is another problem. Exposure to radioactivity can have harmful effects on health, which includes temporary sterility, sickness, nausea, vomiting and

diarrhea cancer, cataracts and decreased fertility, depending upon exposure and the type of radiation. Radiation sickness is also known as "Acute radiation syndrome" (ARS).¹² Disposal of nuclear waste is another difficult problem Though low-level wastes do not generally need any processing prior to disposal in shallow land burial, intermediate wastes need to be incorporated into chemically inactive materials such as concrete, bitumen or resins, before being stored at designated sites, whereas high-level radioactive waste needs to be stored in containers placed in water-cooled ponds, in order to dissipate the heat generated by the radioactive isotopes before their disposal. The storage of certain radioactive wastes is problematic and costly.

Extinction of species and loss of biodiversity: Over the last century, various plants and animal species have become extinct which has resulted in loss of biodiversity. This has become a global phenomenon with over 1,000 species disappearing per year. According to a study, it is estimated that the total number of existing species is about "13 million and the existence of 18 percent of mammals, 11 percent of birds, 8 percent of plants, and 5 percent of fishes" is under threat due to increasing human activities like deforestation and population growth. The recent study conducted by "Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services" (IPBES) known as the "Global assessment report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services" (2019) assessed that approximately 25 percent of plants and animals are threatened, with around 1 million of species already facing extinction ("IPBES," 2019, p. 12). Since a number of species in an ecosystem are affected by the extinction of a single species of flora and fauna, an imbalance is created in the environment. Not only this, loss of biodiversity also affects the humans as it leads to problems like food and water security, threatening of purification of air among others.¹²

Increasing carbon footprint–Carbon footprint is the impact of the human activity on the environment. It measures the amount of greenhouse gases a human activity can create. It is also defined as the total amount of greenhouse gases produced "to indirectly or directly support the human activities," which is usually "expressed in equivalent tons of carbon dioxide" ("What is a carbon footprint–definition," 2008). Carbon footprint has increased due to increasing human activity, which can cause global warming, thus becoming an environmental concern. The major contributors to increasing carbon footprint are factors like industrialization, transportation and agriculture. Energy producing companies are the largest contributors whereas the largest emitters of human-induced greenhouse gases are USA, China and India, while South Africa being the largest contributor in the African continent ("What is Carbon footprint," 2019). China emits "27 percent of global carbon emissions," followed by the "USA with 14 percent".¹³ One can reduce carbon footprint by reducing the usage of non renewable sources of energy, consuming less electricity, using public transport instead of car.

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