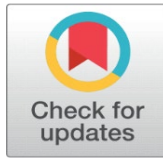# INTRODUCTION TO ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS FROM AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, environmental challenges have emerged as a widespread issue globally, taking on both transnational and global dimensions. However, there is no singular, centralized authority responsible for overseeing and regulating these environmental concerns on an international scale. Consequently, global governance in this realm is organized through a complex network of international treaties, multilateral institutions, non-governmental organizations, and multinational corporations. Within this context, India finds itself in a unique dual role in global climate politics. As a developing economy with relatively low historical and per capita emissions, it also represents a large and rapidly expanding economy facing increasing emissions. Like many other nations, India navigates a fragmented global framework defined by various international agreements. This paper presents an overview of environmental politics from an Indian perspective, emphasizing the distinctive challenges and opportunities India encounters in the realm of global environmental governance. Furthermore, the research investigates how India maneuvers through this intricate governance landscape, with a particular focus on the interplay between domestic policies and international obligations.

Keywords: India, Environment, Politics, Treaties, Global, Climate, Organizations, etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

Until the late 1950s, environmental issues were largely overlooked and held a minor place on the political agenda, with society taking natural resources for granted. Resources were viewed as inexhaustible, leading to their indiscriminate exploitation without consideration for potential consequences. However, post-World War II, critical issues such as hunger, population growth, biodiversity loss, and ozone layer depletion began to emerge on the global stage. These pressing challenges necessitated action from the international institutions established to foster peace and coexistence. Scholars suggest that the rising awareness of these issues is linked to the relationship between "ecological scarcity" and violent conflict[1]. A significant example of this connection is the German invasion of Norway and Sweden, motivated by the pursuit of iron ore and other essential resources[2]. This marked a landmark moment in recognizing the importance of environmental considerations in global politics and conflict.

Environmental degradation is another significant factor contributing to global issues. Nations have established borders and allocated resources. However, there is no formal division of the environment itself. We share the same atmosphere, space, and water bodies. Yet developed countries, which constitute only 27% of the global population, control

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[2] Lathrop, H. O. (1940). The Struggle for Natural Resources as a Cause of the European War. *Journal of Geography*, *39*(6), 237-242.

approximately 75% of the world's wealth and resources[3]. This disparity has resulted in severe environmental stress. Addressing the reasonable needs of all individuals without depleting natural resources necessitates unprecedented global cooperation. Furthermore, the conflict between economic growth and environmental conservation highlights the tension between developed and developing nations. This ongoing debate shapes policy formulation, as it raises questions about accountability and responsibility for environmental issues, ultimately giving rise to the field of environmental politics. The phenomenon has been interpreted in various ways by different thinkers. Nonetheless, there is a general agreement that it encompasses the roles of actors such as international organizations, NGOs, and states in environmental protection and decision-making[4].

2. THE GLOBAL BACKGROUND

Environmental problems are highly complex and interconnected, meaning that the impacts in one region can ripple across the globe. For instance, industrial activities in the Pacific may cause water pollution that affects ecosystems and communities in parts of Asia. This growing understanding of the global nature of environmental issues has given rise to various environmental movements, the establishment of NGOs focused on ecological concerns, and the creation of green political parties. Additionally, publications on environmental topics have increased, further raising awareness and driving political action. The 1972 Stockholm Conference, organized by the United Nations (UN), was the first major global effort to address environmental issues. It brought together leaders from 113 countries and resulted in the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The conference also produced an action plan with 109 recommendations aimed at promoting sustainable development and conservation.

The Stockholm Conference placed environmental concerns firmly on the international agenda and paved the way for future environmental treaties and agreements. One of the most significant achievements in global environmental diplomacy was the adoption of the Montreal Protocol in 1987. This treaty, designed to phase out substances that deplete the ozone layer, remains the only UN agreement to receive universal ratification by all 197 member states. Another key milestone was the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, which emphasized the need for sustainable development. This event highlighted the importance of balancing environmental protection with economic growth. The Kyoto Protocol, adopted in 1997, set legally binding targets for participating countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. This agreement marked a major step forward in global efforts to address climate change.

However, achieving consensus has remained challenging, as seen in subsequent conferences like the Johannesburg Summit in 2002, the Bali Conference in 2007, and the Copenhagen Summit in 2009, where divisions between developed and developing nations often complicated progress. The most recent landmark event was the 2015 Paris Climate Summit, which sought to unite nations in taking decisive measures against climate change. Countries committed to keeping global warming well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursued efforts to limit the temperature rise to 1.5°C. The summit also introduced the concept of nationally determined contributions (NDCs), allowing countries to set their own emission reduction targets. These conventions and agreements reflect the growing recognition of the need for international cooperation to address environmental challenges. As a result, most countries have formally committed to the principles of sustainable development, and environmental issues have become central to international diplomacy. Environmental advocacy now plays a key role in both national and global politics. Green parties have become well-established in many European countries, participating in coalition governments, while mainstream political parties have adopted more eco-friendly rhetoric.

Despite these efforts, the overall state of the environment continues to decline. Many countries struggle to balance environmental commitments with national interests, and meaningful progress remains limited. Developing countries, in particular, prioritize industrialization and economic growth, leading to increased resource consumption, urbanization, and pollution. This focus on rapid development has significantly contributed to environmental degradation. The tension

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[3] Weinthal, E., & Luong, P. J. (2006). Combating the resource curse: An alternative solution to managing mineral wealth. Perspectives on politics, 4(1), 35-53.

[4] Chasek, P., Downie, D. L., & Levy, M. (2000). The Global Environment in the 21st Century: Prospects for International Cooperation. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2000.

between economic growth and environmental responsibility remains one of the greatest challenges to achieving global sustainability. While countries acknowledge the importance of addressing climate change and other environmental issues, their actions are often constrained by short-term economic goals and national priorities. Overcoming this conflict will require greater cooperation, innovation, and commitment from all nations to ensure that future development aligns with the principles of sustainability.

3. THE NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE

The divide between developed and developing countries has created a north-south disparity in addressing environmental issues. The developing South, which has contributed relatively little to environmental degradation, contrasts with the industrialized North, responsible for much of the damage. The global North includes countries like the US, Canada, Western Europe, developed parts of Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. In contrast, the global South comprises regions such as Africa, Latin America, and developing parts of Asia, including the Middle East[5].

Many southern nations argue that since the North's rapid industrialization has historically generated high levels of greenhouse gases, the North bears the primary responsibility for reducing emissions. They also believe that developing countries should have more flexibility in resource use, as their emissions remain comparatively low and development is their right. However, the North rejects this view, arguing that the circumstances of developing countries and developed nations differ significantly, making uniform expectations impractical. This ongoing tension between the need for development in the South and the demand for global environmental responsibility complicates efforts toward effective international cooperation.

Scholars suggest that the divide between the North and South is not merely a rich-poor distinction but reflects differing environmental priorities and goals in global environmental politics[6]. Although it began as an economic divide, it has evolved into a blame game over who is responsible for environmental degradation and who should take action. Both sides are reluctant to accept accountability. The North avoids responsibility for its historical environmental damage while pressuring the South to focus on conservation. Meanwhile, the South prioritizes industrialization and economic growth over environmental concerns. Despite the frequent use of the term "sustainable development" at environmental conventions, there remains significant ambiguity—sustainability is emphasized by the North, while development remains the South's focus. As a result, while developed nations continue the environmental impact driven by their industrial past, developing nations have followed a similar path, further contributing to environmental degradation. This ongoing tension complicates global cooperation, as both sides pursue their own interests, hindering meaningful progress toward sustainability.

At this critical moment, it is essential that climate change policies be designed to be fair and based on each country's contribution to the problem. Both developed and developing nations have, to varying degrees, played a role in creating the current climate crisis. Consequently, the ongoing blame game must cease, as it hinders progress and further harms the environment, pushing it toward an irreversible state of decline. Nations need to establish a globally accepted consensus that moves beyond finger-pointing and embraces sustainable development, with clear definitions of what sustainability and development entail. While it is evident that the North bears a greater share of historical responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions, acknowledging this reality is crucial for effective solutions. Additionally, the North should provide increased support for initiatives in the South aimed at combating climate change. Simultaneously, the South must recognize its responsibilities and commit to keeping emissions within acceptable limits. Collaborative efforts are vital to ensuring a healthier planet for future generations.

4. INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS – WATCHDOGS OR FALSE ASPIRATIONS?

Historically, the traditional nation-state approach to addressing environmental issues relied on bilateral agreements between countries when problems crossed borders. However, it has become increasingly clear that this strategy is insufficient, as many environmental challenges are inherently global and require extensive international cooperation. As a result, there has been a notable increase in global environmental policymaking and political engagement over the past

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[6] Dauvergne, P. (2018). Environmentalism Of The Rich. MIT press.

few decades. Countries have established numerous international organizations and entered into hundreds of multilateral environmental agreements to tackle these pressing issues. It is now widely acknowledged that no single nation can effectively address serious environmental challenges in isolation; collaborative efforts are essential for managing and resolving these problems[7].

To bolster these initiatives, billions of dollars in "green aid" have been allocated to support cross-border efforts[8], and various transnational networks and governance frameworks have been developed. Despite these efforts, many perceive that these institutions are falling short of their intended goals, leading to growing skepticism regarding the effectiveness of multilateral initiatives[9]. Some scholars even go so far as to label unproductive United Nations conferences as failures, criticizing them as mere talk-shops and media events that offer little in terms of tangible solutions to global environmental problems[10]. This disillusionment highlights the urgent need for more effective and accountable international cooperation.

A case study examining the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF), the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), and the 2009 Copenhagen Accord on climate change has found that many international institutions lack substantive policy content and are often designed to be ineffective[11]. While some environmental institutions fail to contribute positively to conservation efforts, others, such as the World Bank, have been shown to have indirect negative impacts on the environment. As a leading global development organization, the World Bank has a controversial history of financing projects that harm ecosystems, including initiatives that promote deforestation, industrialization, and unsustainable agricultural practices[12]. Notably, the World Bank has significantly funded India's Sardar Sarovar Dam project, which faced strong opposition from Indian environmentalists and was labeled as the "world's biggest planned environmental disaster[13]." Despite these criticisms, the situation is not entirely negative. Several agencies established under the UN have made notable progress in addressing various environmental issues, demonstrating that effective action is possible within the framework of international cooperation.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has actively collaborated with various governmental and non-governmental organizations, hosting meetings to discuss critical environmental issues. Among the key challenges addressed by UNEP are biodiversity loss, ozone layer depletion, desertification, toxic waste management and disposal, and the protection of endangered species and their habitats. Despite these efforts, UNEP lacks executive authority and faces significant budgetary constraints, as member nations do not contribute as much funding as required. The Rio Earth Summit in 1992 further advanced global environmental governance by adopting several significant agreements, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which is still in force today. The UNFCCC established a framework for ongoing international negotiations aimed at creating binding protocols for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Since then, participating countries convene annually at the Conference of the Parties (COP) to evaluate progress and engage in discussions on effective strategies to combat climate change. However, while the objectives set forth in these agreements are ambitious, actual efforts to achieve them require much better cohesion and coordination among nations to be truly effective in addressing the urgent challenges posed by climate change.

5. INDIA'S STAND FOR ITS CITIZENS – DEVELOPMENT V ENVIRONMENT

The environment has always held significant importance in Indian culture, with reverence for nature deeply rooted in traditions that date back to pre-independence. In the aftermath of India gaining independence, political discourse has

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predominantly revolved around two critical themes: equity and growth. However, environmental concerns have emerged as a crucial third dimension, introducing the concept of sustainability into the debate[14]. This has resulted in a complex interplay between economic growth and environmental preservation, leading to inherent conflicts. Proponents of economic growth argue that prioritizing development is essential, viewing environmental degradation as an acceptable cost for achieving prosperity and progress. Conversely, environmentalists challenge the very foundations of such development, asserting that protecting the environment is non-negotiable and vital for the well-being of future generations. The environmental movement in India has been championed by prominent activists like Baba Amte, Medha Patkar, and Sunderlal Bahuguna, alongside numerous voluntary organizations and grassroots groups.

Millions of Indians have rallied behind these environmental leaders, participating in campaigns, signing petitions, and joining demonstrations. One notable example is the Chipko movement, which brought attention to the importance of renewable resources—such as soil, air, water, and trees—during a period of rapid industrialization in the country[15]. Numerous high-profile campaigns have also emerged, advocating for the banning of incandescent light bulbs, promoting the purchase of environmentally friendly electronic goods, and raising awareness in coastal cities about the threats posed by rising sea levels. While some critics perceive these movements as a manifestation of developed countries exerting undue influence over Indian politics by emphasizing environmental issues, they argue that it is a strategic attempt to hinder India's potential economic competitors. However, it is crucial to understand that development encompasses more than just basic economic parameters; it includes the choices of individuals, the freedom to make those choices, and the capacity for holistic growth. As India navigates its path toward development, it faces the challenge of balancing economic ambitions with the imperative of environmental sustainability. A comprehensive approach that integrates these dimensions is essential to ensure a future where economic growth does not come at the expense of ecological integrity, ultimately fostering a society that values both progress and preservation.

Following the Stockholm Conference in 1972, India embarked on the development of a comprehensive legal and institutional framework for environmental protection. The 1976 amendments to the Constitution formally included "environmental protection" among the responsibilities of the government, delegating authority to both central and state levels. This led to the establishment of several new laws, including the Environment (Protection) Act of 1986, along with amendments to existing legislation governing water and air quality. However, despite these significant legislative milestones, the concerns of many Indian environmentalists remain largely unaddressed. Most environmental indicators in India are trending alarmingly downward, which poses a risk to the progress achieved in other sectors. A key factor contributing to this stagnation is the tendency to prioritize economic development over environmental sustainability, coupled with bureaucratic inefficiencies. Often State pollution boards find themselves with additional duties to monitor regulations without proper resources, infrastructure or expertise.

Complexity of such factors pose a serious challenge on grounds to counter the environmental issues which reflects in the reports and indicators. In 2007, Greenpeace India published a report highlighting disparities in emission levels across different economic classes, criticizing the wealthy elite for "hiding behind the poor[16]." As a result, hundreds of millions of impoverished individuals continue to lack access to the benefits of industrialization. This scenario reflects the broader north-south divide seen on the global stage, with similar dynamics playing out within India. The blame game persists nationally, pitting the reckless consumption patterns of the affluent against those advocating for a more collective, ecological approach to understanding sustainability challenges. This ongoing struggle emphasizes the urgent need for a balanced strategy that harmonizes economic growth with environmental preservation, ensuring that development benefits all segments of society while protecting the ecosystem.

6. INDIA AND GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

Initially, India was hesitant to engage in global environmental politics, showing reluctance to commit to international agreements. However, over the past decade, the country has demonstrated a newfound willingness to participate actively

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[15] Shiva, V., & Bandyopadhyay, J. (1986). The evolution, structure, and impact of the Chipko movement. *Mountain research and development*, 133-142.

[16] India, G. (2007). Hiding behind the poor: a report by Greenpeace on climate justice. *Bangalore: Greenpeace India Society*.

in global environmental governance. India has taken on a more significant role in international climate change negotiations and has supported various climate-friendly initiatives. This shift marks India's transition from a marginal protestor in global climate discussions to a key player in shaping international efforts to address climate change.

At the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, India joined the G77 plus China coalition, where it played a pivotal role in negotiations. The country crafted a unified position for developing nations, effectively representing the South coalition's interests[17]. This steadfast approach continued during the Kyoto Protocol negotiations, where Indian authorities firmly rejected any commitments to reduce emissions. They stressed the importance of preserving India's right to socio-economic development. As a result of these negotiations, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was established, requiring developed countries to commit to "quantified emission limitation and reduction objectives." In contrast, developing nations like India were exempted from legally binding emission reduction commitments. This framework underscored India's position on balancing development needs with environmental responsibilities.

Over time, Indian leaders have crafted a robust domestic climate change strategy while simultaneously adopting a proactive foreign policy to bolster international efforts against climate change[18]. Throughout this process, India has consistently enacted legislation to ratify the international treaties to which it is a signatory. The nation has implemented a range of impressive domestic measures aimed at mitigating climate change, including laws and policies designed to lower carbon emissions, promote renewable energy, and enhance reforestation efforts. The Paris Agreement, signed in April 2016, serves as a significant example of India's positive diplomatic influence in global climate discussions. India has taken on a leadership role in negotiations, establishing itself as a responsible participant in global environmental governance.

Under the Paris Climate Agreement, India has committed to three key targets: reducing carbon emissions and creating an additional carbon sink by 2030. According to a 2018 UNFCCC report, India is on track to meet its goals for reducing emission intensity and increasing the share of non-fossil fuel-based power capacity well ahead of the deadline. In this way, India is not only advancing its domestic climate initiatives but also shaping its environmental diplomacy as a form of soft power on the global stage. This approach reflects India's commitment to sustainable development while actively engaging with international partners in addressing climate change challenges.

7. THE CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS

Global environmental challenges demand collaborative international solutions, as they cannot be effectively addressed by individual nation-states acting independently. Cooperation among countries is essential for resolving these issues. However, achieving international environmental cooperation is often hindered by significant collective action problems. Nations frequently struggle to trust each other's intentions, leading to skepticism about mutual commitments. This lack of trust creates barriers to collaboration, making countries hesitant to work together to safeguard shared resources and protect the global environment. Without a foundation of trust and commitment, efforts to address environmental problems are likely to remain fragmented and ineffective, underscoring the need for enhanced international dialogue and cooperation.

Although numerous treaties and agreements exist to address environmental issues, they cannot achieve their intended goals without robust international cooperation. International environmental treaties, governed by international law, are binding only on the states that agree to comply with them. However, there is no global enforcement mechanism, such as an international police force, to ensure adherence to these agreements. As a result, compliance with the provisions and obligations of such treaties relies heavily on the good faith of the participating states.

Moreover, leaders from developed and developing nations often have differing perspectives on the nature and urgency of environmental problems. This divergence in viewpoints can lead to disagreements on the severity of potential environmental disasters. The choices that leaders make regarding environmental issues are heavily influenced by

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[17] Joshi, S. (2013). Understanding India's Representation of North–South Climate Politics. *Global Environmental Politics*, *13*(2), 128-147.

[18] Rastogi, N. P. (2011). Winds of change: India's emerging climate strategy. *The International Spectator*, *46*(2), 127-141.

domestic politics and local events, which can shift their commitments before international conferences on environmental matters. These internal political dynamics often compel leaders to adopt varied positions, complicating efforts for cohesive global action. To effectively address environmental challenges, it is crucial to bridge these gaps in perspective and enhance collaborative efforts among nations, ensuring a united front in tackling the pressing issues facing our planet. There is also a pressing need for a clearly defined framework for Environmental Politics, as the existing definitions often lack clarity and precision. In addition to establishing this framework, raising public awareness about environmental issues is crucial for fostering a more informed citizenry. Currently, discussions within Environmental Politics frequently overlook important topics, such as animal welfare and the impacts of environmental degradation on wildlife. While modern technology has contributed significantly to the depletion of natural resources, it also holds the potential to mitigate environmental damage and promote sustainable practices. Advanced technologies can be creatively employed to optimize the use of resources and reduce environmental harm.

Developed nations, with their extensive experience in addressing environmental challenges, have a responsibility to lead efforts in solving these issues. They possess access to better technologies and resources, which can facilitate effective solutions. However, the contributions of developing countries are equally important and cannot be disregarded. Environmental challenges cannot be addressed solely through global agreements; action must also occur at the local and grassroots levels. To ensure compliance, treaties should be made binding, and nations that fail to adhere to established norms should face penalties. This multi-faceted approach, combining international cooperation with local action and accountability, is essential for effectively tackling the complex and interconnected environmental problems facing our planet today.

CONCLUSION

As our relationship with the natural environment evolves, it becomes increasingly evident that we face profound and multifaceted challenges. Regardless of their origins, the threats posed to the environment are not only pressing but also universal, impacting every corner of the globe. The survival of our planet is at stake, making environmental degradation a critical concern for all humanity. This situation underscores the notion that environmental politics is inherently global in nature, necessitating unified attention, collaboration, and cooperation among all nations—both developed and developing. The interconnectedness of environmental issues illustrates that no single nation can address these challenges in isolation.

Global environmental politics has historically been influenced by broader political developments, shaping how nations engage with and respond to ecological crises. As we confront a multitude of complex environmental problems, the significance of Environmental Politics will only intensify in the coming years. This will require not only the commitment of developed countries, which possess the technological resources and experience necessary to lead the charge but also the invaluable contributions of developing nations that offer unique insights and solutions from their own experiences. To forge a sustainable future, a multi-dimensional approach is essential, one that combines international cooperation with local actions, accountability, and awareness-raising among the public. By creating a clear framework for Environmental Politics and making treaties binding, we can establish a system where nations are held accountable for their actions. The journey ahead is challenging, yet it is imperative that we unite in our efforts, embracing the urgent need for collaborative action to safeguard our planet for future generations. India's unique position, being an economic superpower and a developing nation, makes it a worthy actor to voice out the south's concern and bridge the gap with the North block.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare no conflict of interest between them.