The Environmental Movement in the Global South: The Pivotal Agent in the Fight against Global Warming

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Contents

The developing world's stance towards the question of the environment has often been equated with the pugnacious comments of former Malaysian Prime Minister Mohamad Mahathir, such as his famous lines at the Rio Conference on the Environment and Development in June 1992:

"When the rich chopped down their own forests, built their poison-belching factories and scoured the world for cheap resources, the poor said nothing. Indeed they paid for the development of the rich. Now the rich claim a right to regulate the development of the poor countries...As colonies we were exploited. Now as independent nations we are to be equally exploited." [1].

Mahathir has been interpreted in the North as speaking for a South that seeks to catch up whatever the cost and where the environmental movement is weak or non-existent. Today, China is seen as the prime exemplar of this Mahathirian obsession with rapid industrialization with minimal regard for the environment.

This view of the South's perspective on the environment is a caricature. In fact, the environmental costs of rapid industrialization are of major concern to significant sectors of the population of developing countries and, in many of them, the environmental movement has been a significant actor. Moreover, there is currently an active discussion in many countries of alternatives to the destabilizing high-growth model.

Emergence of the Environmental Movement in the NICs

Among the most advanced environmental movements are those in Korea and Taiwan, which were once known as "Newly Industrializing Countries" (NICs). This should not be surprising since the process of rapid industrialization in these two societies from 1965 to 1990 took place with few environmental controls, if any. In Korea, the Han River that flows through Seoul and the Nakdong River flowing through Pusan were so polluted by unchecked dumping of industrial waste that they were close to being classified as biologically dead. Toxic waste dumping reached critical

proportions. Seoul achieved the distinction in 1978 of being the city with the highest content of sulphuric dioxide in the air, with high levels being registered as well in Inchon, Pusan, Ulsan, Masan, Anyang, and Changweon [2].

In Taiwan, high-speed industrialization had its own particular hellish contours. Taiwan's formula for balanced growth was to prevent industrial concentration and encourage manufacturers to set up shop in the countryside. The result was a substantial number of the island's 90,000 hectares locating on rice fields, along waterways, and beside residences. With three factories per square mile, Taiwan's rate of industrial density was 75 times that of the US. One result was that 20 per cent of farm land was polluted by industrial waste water and 30 per cent of rice grown on the island was contaminated with heavy metals, including mercury, arsenic, and cadmium [3].

In both societies, farmers, workers, and the environment bore the costs of high-speed industrialization. Both societies, it is not surprising, saw the emergence of an environmental movement that was spontaneous, that drew participants from different classes, that saw environmental demands linked with issues of employment, occupational health, and agricultural crisis, and that was quite militant. Direct action became a weapon of choice because, as Michael Hsiao pointed out:

"People have learned that protesting can bring results; most of the actions for which we could find out the results had achieved their objectives. The polluting factories were either forced to make immediate improvement of the conditions or pay compensation to the victims. Some factories were even forced to shut down or move to another location. A few preventive actions have even succeeded in forcing prospective plants to withdraw from their planned construction" [4].

The environmental movements in both societies were able to force government to come out with restrictive new rules on toxics, industrial waste, and air pollution. Ironically, however, these successful cases of citizen action created a new problem, which was the migration of polluting industries from Taiwan and Korea to China and Southeast Asia. Along with Japanese firms, Korean and Taiwanese enterprises went to Southeast Asia and China mainly for two reasons: cheap labor and lax environmental laws.

Environmental Struggles in Southeast Asia

Unlike in Korea and Taiwan, environmental movements already existed in a number of the Southeast Asian countries before the period of rapid industrialization, which in their case occurred in the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties. These movements had emerged in the seventies and eighties in struggles against nuclear power, as in the Philippines; against big hydroelectric dams, as in Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines; and against deforestation and marine pollution, as in Thailand and the Philippines. These were epic battles, like the struggle against the Chico River Dam in the northern Philippines and the fight against the Pak Mun Dam in the northeast of Thailand, which forced the World Bank to withdraw its planned support for giant hydroelectric projects, an outcome that, as we shall see later on, also occurred in struggle against the Narmada Dam in India. The fight against industrial associated partly with foreign firms seeking to escape strict environmental regulations at home was a case of a new front being opened up in an ongoing struggle to save the environment.

Perhaps even more than in Northeast Asia, the environmental question in Southeast Asia was an issue that involved the masses and went beyond being a middle-class issue. In the Chico struggle, the opposition were indigenous people, while in the fight against the Pak Mun Dam, it was small farmers and fisherfolk. The environmental issue was also more coherently integrated into an

overarching critique. In the case of the Philippines, for instance, deforestation was seen as an inevitable consequence of a strategy of export-oriented growth imposed by World Bank-International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programs that sought to pay off the country's massive foreign debt with the dollars gained from exporting the country's timber and other natural resources and manufactures produced by cheap labor. The middle class, workers, the urban poor, and environmentalists were thrust into a natural alliance. Meantime, transnational capital, local monopoly capital, and the central government were cast in the role of being an anti-environmental axis.

The environmental movements in Southeast Asia played a vital role not only in scuttling projects like the Bataan nuclear plant but in ousting the dictatorships that reigned there in the seventies and eighties. Indeed, because the environment was not perceived by authoritarian regimes as "political," organizing around environmental and public health issues was not initially proscribed. Thus environmental struggles became an issue around which the anti-dictatorship movement could organize and reach new people. Environmental destruction became one more graphic example of a regime's irresponsibility. In Indonesia, for example, the environmental organization WALHI went so far as to file a lawsuit for pollution and environmental destruction against six government bodies, including the Minister of the Environment and Population [5]. By the time the dictatorships wised up to what was happening, it was often too late: environmentalism and anti-fascism fed on one another.

Environmental Protests in China

We might be seeing the same process in China today.

The environmental crisis in China is very serious. For example, the ground water table of the North China plain is dropping by 1.5 meters (5 feet) per year. This region produces 40 percent of China's grain. As environmentalist Dale Wen remarks, "One cannot help wonder about how China will be fed once the ground aquifer is depleted" [6]. Water pollution and water scarcity; soil pollution, soil degradation and desertification; global warming and the coming energy crisis—these are all byproducts of China's high-speed industrialization and massively expanded consumption.

Most of the environmental destabilization in China is produced by local enterprises and massive state projects such as the Three Gorges Dams, but the contribution of foreign investors is not insignificant. Taking advantage of very lax implementation of environmental laws in China, many western TNCs have relocated their most polluting factories into the country and have exacerbated or even created many environmental problems. Wen notes that the Pearl River Delta and Yangtze River Delta, the two Special Economic Zones where most TNC subsidiaries are located, are the most seriously affected by heavy metal and POPs (persistent organic pollutants) pollution [7].

Global warming is not a distant threat. The first comprehensive study of the impact of the sea level rise of global warming by Gordon McGranahan, Deborah Balk, and Bridget Anderson puts China as the country in Asia most threatened by the sea level rise of up to 10 meters over the next century [8]. 144 million of China's population live in low-elevation coastal zones, and this figure is likely to increase owing to the export-oriented industrialization strategies pursued by the government, which has involved the creation of numerous special economic zones. "From an environmental perspective," the study warns, "there is a double disadvantage to excessive (and potentially rapid) coastal development. First, uncontrolled coastal development is likely to damage sensitive and important ecosystems and other resources. Second, coastal settlement, particularly in the lowlands, is likely to expose residents to seaward hazards such as sea level rise and tropical storms, both of which are likely to become more serious with climate change" [9]. The recent spate

of super-typhoons descending on the Asian mainland from the Western Pacific underlines the gravity of this observation.

In terms of public health, the rural health infrastructure has practically collapsed, according to Dale Wen. The system has been privatized with the introduction of a "fee for service" system that is one component of the neoliberal reform program. One result is the resurgence of diseases that had been brought under control, like tuberculosis and schistosomiasis. Cuba, in contrast, has won plaudits for its rural health care system, which is ironic, says Wen, given that the Cuban system was based on the Maoist era's "barefoot doctor" system [10].

Another big public health issue has been food safety. The combination of the industrialization of food production and the lengthening of the food chain from production to consumption is strongly suspected to be the cause of bird flu, which has migrated from China to other countries. The government has become an unreliable actor in dealing with new diseases such as bird flu and SARS, prone as it is to engage in minimizing the threat if not promoting a cover-up, as it did in the case of SARS.

As in Taiwan and Korea 15 years earlier, we see unrestrained export-oriented industrialization bringing together low-wage migrant labor, farming communities whose lands are being grabbed or ruined environmentally, environmentalists, and the proponents of a major change in political economy called the "New Left." Environment-related riots, protests and disputes in China increased by 30% in 2005 to more than 50,000, as pollution-related unrest has become "a contagious source of instability in the country," as one report put it. Indeed, a great many of recorded protests fused environmental, land-loss, income, and political issues. From 8700 in 1995, what the Ministry of Public Security calls "mass group incidents" have grown to 87,000 in 2005, most of them in the countryside. Moreover, the incidents are growing in average size from 10 or fewer persons in the mid-1990s to 52 people per incident in 2004 [11]. Notable were the April 2005 riots in Huashui, where an estimated 10,000 police officers clashed with desperate villagers who succeeded in repelling strong vested interests polluting their lands.

As in Taiwan, people have discovered the effectiveness of direct action in rural China. "Without the riot, nothing would have changed," said Wang Xiaofang, a 43-year-old farmer. "People here finally reached their breaking point" [12]. As in Southeast Asia, struggles around the environment and public health may be leading to a more comprehensive political consciousness.

The strength of China's environmental movement must not be exaggerated. Indeed, its failures often outnumber its successes. Alliances are often spontaneous and do not go beyond the local level. What Dale Wen calls a national "red green" coalition for change remains a potential force, one that is waiting to be constructed. Nevertheless, the environmental movement is no longer a marginal actor and it is definitely something that the state and big capital have to deal with. Indeed, the ferment in the countryside is a key factor that is said to have made the current Chinese leadership to be more open to suggestions from the so-called "New Left" for a change of course in economic policy from rapid export-oriented growth to a more sustainable and slower domestic-demand led growth.

The Environmental Movement in India

As in China, the environment and public health have been sites of struggle in India. Over the last 25 years, the movement for the environment and public health has exploded in that country. Indeed, one can say that this movement has become one of the forces that is deepening Indian democracy.

Environmental and public health struggles go way back, but perhaps the single biggest event that

propelled the movement to becoming a critical mass was the Bhopal gas leakage on December 3, 1984, which released 40 tons of methyl isocynate, killing 3000 people outright and ultimately causing 15,000 to 20,000 deaths [13]. The struggle for just compensation for the Bhopal victims continues till this day.

There is today a proliferation of struggles in this vast country.

There is the national campaign against Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola plants for drawing ground water and contaminating fields with sludge. There are local struggles against intensive aquaculture farms in Tamil Nadu, Orissa, and other coastal states. There is a non-violent but determined campaign by farmers against GMO's, which has involved the uprooting and burning of fields planted to genetically engineered rice.

In public health, the key issue has been the tremendous pressure from foreign pharmaceutical companies to get India to adopt patent legislation that would be consistent with the WTO's Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights Agreement (TRIPs). The great fear is that this would affect the ability of the country's pharmaceutical industry to produce cheap generic drugs for both the home market and for export. With between 2 million and 3.6 million people living with HIV—putting India behind South Africa and Nigeria in numbers living with HIV—and with so many African countries with large HIV-infected populations depending on cheap Indian drug imports, to comply or not to comply with TRIPs has become a life-and-death issue.

Two years ago, key amendments pushed by progressive forces were incorporated into the Indian Patents Act, resulting in what one influential journal described as "a relatively loose patents regime for now" [14]. One key amendment was that Indian companies could continue to produce and market drugs they were producing before January 1, 2005, after paying a "reasonable royalty" to the patent holder. They were banned from doing this under the previous patent regime. Another important amendment made the process of exporting drugs to another country less cumbersome by eliminating the need for a compulsory license from that country [15]. These may seem to be minor gains, but in the byzantine world of TRIPs, the devil is in the detail.

It would be worthwhile, at this point, to look closely at what has become the most influential of India's mass-based environmental movement: the anti-dam movement.

Dams often represented the modernist vision that guided many Third World governments in their struggle to catch up with the West in the post-War period. The technological blueprint for power development for the post-World War II period was that of creating a limited number of power generators—giant dams, coal or oil-powered plants, or nuclear plants—at strategic points which would generate electricity that would be distributed to every nook and cranny of the country. Traditional or local sources of power that allowed some degree of self-sufficiency were considered backward. If you were not hooked up to a central grid, you were backward.

Centralized electrification with its big dams, big coal-fired plants, and nuclear plants became the rage. Indeed, there was an almost religious fervor about this vision among leaders and technocrats who defined their life's work as "missionary electrification" or the connection of the most distant village to the central grid. Jawaharlal Nehru, the dominant figure in post-World War II India, called dams the "temples of modern India," a statement that, as Indian author Arundhati Roy points out, made its way into primary school textbooks in every Indian language. Big dams have become an article of faith inextricably linked with nationalism. "To question their utility amounts almost to sedition" [16].

In any event, in the name of missionary electrification, India's technocrats, Roy observes in her

brilliant essay, The Cost of Living, not only built "new dams and irrigation schemes…[but also] took control of small, traditional water-harvesting systems that had been managed for thousands of years and allowed them to atrophy" [17]. Here Roy expresses an essential truth: that centralized electrification preempted the development of alternative power-systems that could have been more decentralized, more people-oriented, more environmentally benign, and less capital intensive.

The key forces behind central electrification were powerful local coalitions of power technocrats, big business, and urban-industrial elites. Despite the rhetoric about "rural electrification," centralized electrification was essentially biased toward the city and industry. Essentially, especially in the case of dams, it involved expending the natural capital of the countryside and the forests to subsidize the growth urban-based industry. Industry was the future. Industry was what really added value. Industry was synonymous with national power. Agriculture was the past.

While these interests benefited, others paid the costs. Specifically, it was the rural areas and the environment that absorbed the costs of centralized electrification. Tremendous crimes have been committed in the name of power generation and irrigation, says Roy, but these were hidden because governments never recorded these costs. In India, Roy calculates that large dams have displaced about 33 million people in the last 50 years, about 60 per cent of them being either untouchables or indigenous peoples

India, in fact, does not have a national resettlement policy for those displaced by dams. The costs to the environment have been tremendous. Roy points out that "the evidence against Big Dams is mounting alarmingly—irrigation disasters, dam-induced floods, the fact that there are more drought prone and flood prone areas today than there were in 1947. The fact is that not a single river in the plains has potable water" [18].

Things changed when the government announced its plans to dam the mighty Narmada River in the late seventies. Instead of quietly accepting the World Bank-backed enterprise, the affected people mounted a resistance that continues to this day. The Narmada Bachao Andolan movement led by Medha Patkar at the Sardar Sarovar Dam and Alok Aggarwal and Silvi at the Maheshwar Dam drew support from all over India and internationally. The resistance of the people, most of them adivasis or indigenous people, succeeded in getting the World Bank to stop funding the project and saddling it with delays, making the completion of the dam uncertain. The Supreme Court, for instance, ordered rehabilitation for all those affected by the Sardar Sarovar Dam's construction, and in March 2005 ruled to halt construction on the dam until this had happened. Construction of the dam has now been halted at 110.6 meters, a figure that is much higher than the 88 metres proposed by the activists, and lower than the 130 meters that the dam is eventually supposed to reach. It is unclear at this point what the final outcome of the project will be or when it will be completed, though the entire project is meant to be finished by 2025 [19]. The fate of the Maheshwar Dam is similarly unclear.

Equally important was the broader political impact of the Narmada struggle. It proved to be the cutting edge of the social movements that have deepened India's democracy and transformed the political scene. The state bureaucracy and political parties must now listen to these movements or risk opposition or, in the case of parties, being thrown out of power. Social movements in the rural areas played a key role in stirring up the mass consciousness that led to the defeat in 2004 of the neoliberal coalition led by the Hindu chauvinist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) that had campaigned on the pro-globalization slogan "India Shining." While its successor, the Congress Party-led coalition, has turned its back on the rural protest that led to its election and followed the same anti-agriculture and pro-globalization policies of the BJP, it risks provoking an even greater backlash in the near future.

The environmental movement faces its biggest challenge today: global warming. As in China, the threat is not distant either in space or in time. The Mumbai deluge of 2005 came at a year of excessive rainfall that would normally occur once in a hundred years [20]. The Himalayan glaciers have been retreating, with one of the largest of them, Gangotri, receding at what one journal described as "an alarming rate, influencing the stream run-off of Himalayan rivers" [21]. Six per cent, or 63.2 million, of India's population live in low elevation coastal zones that are vulnerable to sea-level rise [22]. On the Gujarat coast, sea level rise is displacing villages, as it is many more places along India's 7,500 km-long coastline. One report claims that in the "Sunderbans, two islands have already vanished from the map, displacing 7000 people. Twelve more islands are likely to go under owing to an annual 3.14 sea level rise, which will make 70,000 refugees. Five villages in Orissa's Bhitarkanika National Park, famous for the mass nesting of Olive Ridley turtles, have been submerged, and 18 others are likely to go under" [23].

As in China, the challenge lies in building up a mass movement that might be unpopular not only with the elite but also with sections of the urban-based middle class sectors that have been the main beneficiaries of the high-growth economic strategy that has been pursued since the early 1990's.

National Elites and Third Worldism

The reason for tracing the evolution of a mass-based environmental movement in East Asia and India is to counter the image that the Asian masses are inert elements that uncritically accept the environmentally damaging high-growth export-oriented industrialization models promoted by their governing elites. It is increasingly clear to ordinary people throughout Asia that the model has wrecked agriculture, widened income inequalities, led to increased poverty after the Asian financial crises, and wreaked environmental damage everywhere.

It is the national elites that spout the ultra-Third Worldist line that the South has yet to fulfill its quota of polluting the world while North has exceeded its quota. It is they who call for an exemption of the big rapidly industrializing countries from mandatory limits on the emission of greenhouse gases under a new Kyoto Protocol. When the Bush administration says it will not respect the Kyoto Protocol because it does not bind China and India, and the Chinese and Indian governments say they will not tolerate curbs on their greenhouse gas emissions because the US has not ratified Kyoto, they are in fact playing out an unholy alliance to allow their economic elites to continue to evade their environmental responsibilities and free-ride on the rest of the world.

This alliance has now become formalized in the so-called "Asia Pacific Partnership" created last year by the US, China, India, Japan, Korea, and the United States as a rival to the United Nations-negotiated Kyoto Protocol. Having recently recruited Canada, which is now led by Bush clone Stephen Harper, this grouping seeks voluntary, as opposed mandatory curbs on greenhouse gas emissions. This is a dangerous band of states whose agenda is nothing else than to spew carbon as they damn well please, which is what voluntary targets are all about.

The Need for Global Adjustment

There is no doubt that the burden of adjustment to global warming will fall on the North, and that this adjustment will have to be made in the next 10 to 15 years, and that the adjustment needed might need to be much greater than the 50 per cent reduction from the 1990's level by 2050 that is being promoted by the G 8. In the eyes of some experts, what might be required is in the order of 100 or 150 per cent reduction from 1990 levels. However, the South will also have to adjust,

proportionately less than the North but also rather stringently.

The South's adjustment will not take place without the North taking the lead. But it will also not take place unless its leaders junk the export-oriented, high-growth paradigm promoted by the World Bank and most economists to which its elites and many middle strata are addicted.

People in the South are open to an alternative to a model of growth that has failed both the environment and society. For instance, in Thailand, a country devastated by the Asian financial crisis and wracked by environmental problems, globalization and export-oriented growth are now bad words. To the consternation of the Economist, Thais are more and more receptive to the idea of a "sufficiency economy" promoted by popular monarch King Bhumibol, which is an inward-looking strategy that stresses self-reliance at the grassroots and the creation of stronger ties among domestic economic networks, along with "moderately working with nature" [24].

Thailand may be an exception in terms of the leadership role for a more sustainable path played by an elite, and even there the commitment of that elite to an alternative path is questioned by many. What is clear is that in most other places in the South, one cannot depend on the elites and some sections of the middle class to decisively change course. At best, they will procrastinate. The fight against global warming will need to be propelled mainly by an alliance between progressive civil society in the North and mass-based citizens' movements in the South.

As in North, the environmental movements in the South have seen their ebbs and flows. It appears that, as with all social movements, it takes a particular conjunction of circumstances to bring an environmental movement to life after being quiescent for some time or to transform diverse local struggles into one nationwide movement. The challenge facing activists in the global North and the global South is to discover or bring about those circumstances that will trigger the formation of a global mass movement that will decisively confront the most crucial challenge of our times.

P.S.

Footnotes

[1] Mohamad Mahathir, Speech at United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, June 13, 1992

[2] The environmental crisis in Korea is treated at length in Walden Bello and Stephanie Rosenfeld, *Dragons in Distress: Asia's Miracle Economies in Crisis* (San Francisco: Food First, 1990), pp. 95-118

[3] See ibid., p. 195-214

[4] Ibid, p. 213

[5] Frieda Sinanu, "Coming of Age: Indonesia's Environmental Network Faces Dilemmas as it Turns 25," Inside Indonesia, 2007; http://insideindonesia.org/content/view/72/29/

[6] Interview with Dale Wen, Focus on the Global South website, http://www.focusweb.org/interview-with-dale-wen On ESSF website: "China Needs an Ecologized Social Democratic System."

[7] Ibid

[8] Cited in R. Ramachandran, "Coming Storms," *Frontline*, Vol. 24, No. 7 (April 7-20, 2007); http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2407/stories/2007042001609000.htm

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[11] Fred Bergsten et al., *China: What the World Needs to Know now about the Emerging Superpower* (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies and Institute for International Economics, 2006), pp. 40-41.

[12] "Increase in Environmental Unrest Causes Instability in China," Green Clippings, http://www.greenclippings.co.za/gc_main/article.php?story=20060906170952367

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[14] V. Sridhar Siddharth Narrain, "A Tempered Patents Regime," *Frontline*, Vol. 22, No. 8 (2005); http://www.flonnet.com/fl2208/stories/20050422004602800.htm

[15] Ibid

[16] Arundhati Roy, *The Cost of Living* (London: Flamingo, 1999).

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid

[19] "Narmada River,"Wikipedia; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narmada_River

[20] R. Ramachandran, "Himalayan Concerns," *Frontline*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2007); http://www.flonnet.com/fl2404/stories/20070309006201000.htm

[21] Ibid

[22] R. Ramachandran, "Coming Storms…"

[23] Dionne Busha, "Gone with the Waves," *Frontline*, Vol. 24, No. 14 (2007); http://www.fllonnet.com/fl2414/stories/20070727000206600.htm

[24] Thailand Human Development Report 2007: Sufficiency Economy and Human Development (Bangkok: United Nations Development Program, 2007), pp. 48-49.