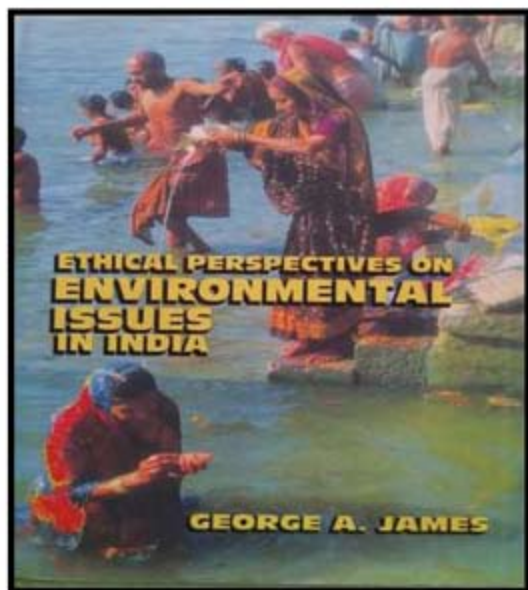


“Sovereignty, Equity and
the Global Environment”

by
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SOVEREIGNTY, EQUITY AND THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT

Shekhar Singh

INTRODUCTION

Humanity today faces the prospect of an ecological disaster whose dimensions are still not fully comprehended. Global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, destruction of forests and other ecosystems, pollution of air, water and land, and the resultant human misery and social dislocation are only some of its manifestations. These, in turn, contribute to many other problems: those of growing marginalisation and the resultant social unrest, of human brutalisation, social and regional sectarianism, the breakdown of democratic social institutions, and of poverty itself. Over much of the world, the most fundamental human conflicts concern access to land, water, forests and grasslands. The degradation and depletion of the environment have aggravated these conflicts, threatened traditional stable social structures and exacerbated poverty.

In the last few years, global attention has gradually been focused onto a set of environmental issues that concern the world. The four most talked about are the threat to the ozone layer, the green-house effect, bio-diversity, and forests. The first is being dealt with through the Montreal Protocol which, among other things, envisages cutbacks and the final phasing out of gases that deplete the ozone layer. There is also a convention on bio-diversity, pressing for conservation and access. In addition, there is an Earth Charter, outlining the principles

of sustainable development, and Agenda 21 containing a statement of goals, strategies and concrete actions for sustainable development.

In essence, the effort is to evolve a shared view of the globe as an environmental entity (Earth Charter) and to get global agreement on the action required to safeguard its present and future (Agenda 21, and the protocol and convention).

THE FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS

Underlying the conventions and agreements are two basic assumptions :

- (a) That activities within (and of) nations that have global implications are of global concern and deserve global monitoring and control (especially underlying the protocol on ozone depletion).
- (b) That certain resources within and of nations are also global resources warranting global protection and monitoring (especially the convention on bio-diversity).

If the objective is to move towards a unified global community, these assumptions, in themselves, are unexceptionable. What gives cause for concern is their selective application.

On the one hand, should not these assumptions also be applied to various other, perhaps more crucial, areas like international trade relations, access to technology, or even to the high standards of living in some of the world's countries? On the other hand, should they not also be applied to issues like water pollution, land degradation, desertification, environmental health, or industrial hazards? If the move is towards forging a global community, should not the move be comprehensive, or at least balanced, reflecting the priorities of a majority of people, especially the more oppressed and beleaguered among them?

Forging global perspectives and agreements demands even a greater level of democracy than forging national agreements. Whereas there is a strong history of national decision making, the past record at forging and maintaining international agreements, which are just and enlightened, is very poor.

Questions of national sovereignty are the first among the more contentious issues that need to be tackled. In many countries today there is support for decentralization, for progressively transferring the power of decision making from bureaucracies to people's institutions, to give the people a right to be involved in decision making on all matters, within the broad framework of a society and a nation. How, then, can these countries support, at the global level, any effort to transfer the powers, functions and the right for self-determination of nation states, into the hands of centralized, global, institutions. This would not only be regressive, and against the need of the hour, but also a self-contradiction for all those nations who practice and preach the principles of decentralised self-determination within nations.

This is not to minimize the importance of global co-operation, or even of global institutions. What needs to be emphasized is that genuine global co-operation can only emerge in a world environment which is just and equitable, and which respects within the larger global community the independence and individuality of each nation state. Those who speak of biological diversity cannot but value cultural diversity.

THE OPTIONS

Much of the world lives unsustainably today. Countries of the North have lifestyles and consumption levels which cannot be sustained even for themselves, leave alone for the whole world. Countries of the South have poverty and low productivity, which not only force people to destroy the environment, but make their pattern of living unsustainable. Within countries of the North there are also oppressed people (e.g. indigenous groups); as within the South there are enclaves of the rich and elite. Obviously changes are required all around, but who starts? Who makes the first sacrifice?

Countries of the South, if they have to get out of the vicious cycle of low productivity, the resultant poverty, causing environmental destruction which finally results in low productivity, they have to transform their societies rapidly into efficient production units which can satisfy the basic needs of the population in a sustainable manner. For this they require the support of each other, and of countries of the North, especially through access to latest technologies, access to markets, human power development and socio-political support.

For countries of the South there appear to be only three options. First, to slow down or suspend the process of economic growth in order to protect the environment. But this would only postpone the problem, for growing human populations and aspirations cannot be contained forever and when the dam finally bursts it will carry away the remnants of environmental security with it.

The second option is for countries of the South to yearn for, as they are doing at present, western lifestyles of today, using technologies and institutional mechanisms that are fifty years old, in an international economic environment which is hostile. This option is also unsustainable, as has been proved in country after country. It leads to a rapid depletion and degradation of natural resources, which aggravates the poverty of the many while enriching a few. It depletes the innate strength of a nation and makes it progressively dependent on external factors and influence which are rarely benign to its interests.

The only real option, then, is for each nation to chart out its own development policy, which is in keeping with the national ethos and balances human aspirations with a commitment to use resources sustainably. For such an option to become workable, nations need to merge traditional knowledge and wisdom with the latest technologies and need an international political and economic environment that is supportive and just.

The one realistic option that countries of the North have is to recognise this, and to realise that if the earth is to be saved, it cannot be saved by them alone, for them alone. They must acknowledge that their current affluence is at least partly built on the destruction, in the past, of the very environment that they are now fighting to save. They must also recognise that if they want to help lead the world out of the current crisis, the only form of leadership that is acceptable to the global community is moral leadership. They must *first* limit their own direct and indirect impact on the environment. They must *first* establish their own commitment to a just social and economic international order, before they can even hope to persuade countries of the South to follow their lead.

The key to saving the world is to limit opulence and waste. The North has much further to go, in this respect, than the South.

THE GLOBAL AGENDA

1. Countries of the North must acknowledge their predominant role in degrading the world's environment and *must be willing to pay the necessary reparations*, to countries of the South, which have been the innocent victims of this war on nature.

Considering the principle of paying reparations is now well established, especially after the recent conflicts in the Middle East, justice demands that the same principle be applied to environmental degradation. The fact is that the impact of ozone depletion and global warming, caused by the huge emissions made by the North, is much more damaging to humanity than any war.

2. The Global community must recognise *the fundamental relationship between economic development and the environment*, and ensure that this recognition is the basis for global interaction.

History has established that societies and nations who have not been able to transcendent problems of poverty and economic underdevelopment, have also not been able to protect their environment. In fact, for most countries, environmental destruction was *first* a result of poverty and only subsequently a contributing cause for its continuation.

The Global community must, therefore, recognise that efforts at tackling environmental issues in isolation of the more fundamental issues of economic development and justice will never succeed. In fact, investments leading to sustainable economic development, especially in countries of the South, would go much further in protecting the environment than investments directly for environmental protection, which would only address the symptoms and not the fundamental causes.

3. The Global Community must also recognise that, in the ultimate analysis, it is *the opulence and waste symptomatic of the North* that poses, and has posed, the greatest threat to the world's environment.

Such opulence and waste has not only depleted much of the world's natural resources, but has also polluted large parts of the earth. It has also become a paradigm for countries of the South, especially

for the rich and powerful segments of their population, who ensure that each of their own countries also follow this path of development, even though it is inappropriate and unsustainable. Such systems and lifestyles have also given birth to technologies, products and value system that are both unjust and unsustainable, but are being increasingly embraced by countries of the South, especially as they are backed by powerful marketing strategies.

Though global attention has been focused on the problem of population growth, the concern seems to be limited to the growth of *numbers of human beings*, rather than the growth in consumption units. In fact, what is relevant from the point of view of global environment, and economics, is not so much the growth in numbers as the growth in consumption. Populations of the North, even if stable or declining, in so far as they have high and growing levels of consumption, pose a much greater threat to global environment than those of the South.

The past and present contribution to the environmental problems of today, by societies and nations with opulent and wasteful life-styles, must be acknowledged and must form the basis for any global agreements on how to save the earth.

4. The Global community must recognise that its own identity is dependent on the *recognition of the identity and sovereignty of nation states*.

The trust, commitment and respect required for global co-operation cannot be build up in an environment where nation states and their governments are looked at with suspicion or contempt. Efforts to bypass national governments, or to take over their legitimate functions and controls, cannot but weaken global co-operation.

In a pluralistic world, with a rich diversity of cultures, races, religions, ideologies and historical experiences, it is but inevitable that differences in opinions would exist. Where such differences are benign, they should be seen as valuable for the future strength of the global community, as the dangers of building a world society on a narrow cultural base are even greater than those of basing our food security on a narrow genetic base.

Where differences seem antagonistic to any one or more members of the world community, however individually large or

powerful they might be, the only acceptable solution is one of discussion and debate. A just global community cannot be based on the right of a few, however powerful, to dictate to the many, however weak.

THE NATIONAL AGENDA

1. India must put its money and its 'political will' where its mouth is

After the lofty statements by the Prime Minister and the Minister of State for Environment, at Rio, the allocations finalised for the VIII Plan and annual plans, for the environment and forestry sector, were abysmal. In fact, in the year of UNCED, the share of the environment and forestry sector, in the Plan, came *down* as compared to earlier years.

Whereas there is no reason why India should not be a moral leader of the world, it has to earn the honour. Apart from financial allocations, in the last year it has seriously regressed in terms of environmental protection. There have been a spate of hastily given clearances to environmentally unviable projects; recent amendments in the export policy have opened the way for exports of sandal wood products, orchids and plants; despite earlier Prime Ministerial level decisions to the contrary, felling of the forests of Andamans has been allowed to escalate; sensitive ecological regions like the North-East, Lakshadweep, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands now attract a tax holiday for new industries. This, despite the fact that India must be one of the few countries in the world which do not legally require industries and development projects to obtain prior environmental clearance, based on an environmental impact assessment. All efforts to introduce such a stipulation have been stymied at the highest level.

India's legitimate case for being regarded as a sovereign, responsible, member of the global community is significantly weakened when its own commitment to protecting its environment is so shaky.

2. India should prevent the North from hijacking the global environmental initiatives.

India has allowed the global community, especially the Northern countries, to take the initiative in defining global environmental issues.

For one, India's own stand in the global fora was an unfortunate one. Having been caught unawares while the global debate developed, India chose, unfortunately, to reduce the whole debate to one of economics and technology, and the consequent transfer of funds and knowhow.

The stand of India and perhaps of many of the G77 countries appeared to be that if they were given enough money and technology then they were willing to do almost anything, but if not, then almost nothing. The G77, led by India, got known as the "Begging Bowl Brigade" — and not without cause.

Perhaps the right position would have been to press home, far more forcefully, the culpability of countries of the North, and demand not loans, nor aid, but reparations. However, all the while reiterating our own commitment to protect the global and national environment, and to do our damndest to make the Northern countries do the same.

3. India needs to be far better prepared for the global debate

Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of Indian preparation for UNCED was that it was done without the involvement of voluntary agencies, and institutions and individuals outside the government. Even within the government, no special expert body was set up and the onerous task of scanning the huge volumes of preparatory papers, and formulating responses and positions, was left to the bureaucrats as one additional responsibility along with their regular work.

Unfortunately, this trend continues and very little meaningful interaction takes place with experts and interested persons, outside the government, even today.

This somewhat casual approach has resulted in the preparatory work being inadequate, often unprofessional, and certainly not a balance of differing view points.