

Environmental Movements in India: Re-Assessing Democracy

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Abstract: *After the Stockholm conference held in 1972, governments of almost all the developed and developing countries had showed considerable enthusiasm towards the needs of environmental preservation but their enthusiasm was confined to making further announcements of environmental policies and legislations, and they failed to bring changes on the ground especially because the agenda of economic development was still dominating the governmental discourses. Due to lack of genuine political will, the structural procedures and mechanisms evolved by different governments for maintaining the ecological health thus proved to be insufficient and over time, the limitless and incessant exploitation of natural resources further deteriorated the state of the global environment. This is probably why a number of grassroots environmental movements were organized by the civil society to think of alternative ways to harnessing natural resources in a way so as to ensure ecological sustainability and social equity. In the global South, environmental movements including the anti-dam movements have emerged as a preferred strategy, at the societal level, for ensuring justice and protecting rights of the underprivileged and marginalized sections of the society. However such movements are considered to be flourished in the specific political environment only. Scholars often believe that a democratic system provides plenty of avenues to people to participate in the policy-making process, and such regimes are more amenable to the societal interests articulated through various collective actions as compared to the authoritarian regimes. This paper reviews this assumption by comparing the response of a democratic government in India and an authoritarian regime in China towards the environmental movements, specifically in context of anti-dam movements which were mobilized against the “Sardar Sarovar dam” and the “Three Gorges dam” in these countries.*

Keywords: Democratic system, authoritarian regime, anti-dam movements, NGOs

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, a number of grassroots environmental movements have been organized by the civil society to think of alternative ways to harnessing natural resources in a way so as to ensure ecological sustainability and social equity in a society. Such movements, in general, have been theorized under the conceptualization of new social movements, and this conception also includes civil right movements, feminist movements, student movements, peace movements for nuclear disarmament, and peasant movements among others. These movements were termed ‘new’ in order to distinguish them from the ‘old’ class based labour movements, which had dominated the mobilization for collective action in Western Europe up to the 1960s. The scope of social movements, thus, has been expanded over the time to address the emerging social concerns, and to incorporate the growing diverse facets of collective actions. Amita Baviskar (2010) rightly noted that the emergence of a spectrum of interconnected and multi-stranded social movements around the world helped to evolve the concept of “new social movements”. Subsequently, the continuous emergence of peaceful movements and resistance within the society reflects the dynamism of the societal structure, and the contrary voices mobilized against the status-quo and stagnation of social order.

The government based upon the democratic philosophies has been long viewed as such political system which is greatly competent of internalizing and representing the ‘will’ of its populace within the governmental discourse and organizations. Moreover it indicates that form of the government in which political power is exercised by the people. Within this backdrop, scholars believe that a democratic system provides ample opportunities to people to participate in the decision-making procedures, and such regimes are more receptive to the societal interests that are articulated through various social movements including environmental movements as compared to the authoritarian regimes (Paehlke 1996; Swain 1997; and Khagram 2005). This paper seeks to interrogate this assumption by comparing the response of a democratic government in India and an authoritarian regime in China towards the environmental movements, specifically in context of anti-dam movements which were mobilized against the “Sardar Sarovar dam” and the “Three Gorges dam” in these countries. The paper also interrogates the structural factors that drive a state’s response towards such movement in general and temporal factors specific to any particular context. However before doing so, it is important to briefly explain the relationship between the environmental movements and their respective political structures, in terms of their openness and democratic quotient.

2. Environmental Movements: Democratic and Non-democratic Frameworks

Scholars like Robert Paehlke, William M Lafferty and James Meadowcroft among others have argued that the environmental movements including the anti-dam movements deploying the non-violent strategies have proven to be more successful in modifying and reforming the developmental practices in democratic politics as compared to those are cast in an authoritarian world. This is mainly because a democratic political system involving decentralized structures to policy making, it argues, provides much better opportunities to address ecological challenges and evolving environmentally sensitive policies (Lafferty eds. 1996). More specifically, a democratic government, for Lafferty, is appropriate for environmental protection because it provides adequate opportunities to people to participate in the process of decision-making and the environment also “involves the issues on which everyone has some right to be consulted” (Lafferty eds. 1996, p. 3). In a similar vein, Sanjeev Khagram contends that the presence of democratic institutions and practices in such a polity accord much better space and opportunities for social mobilization. He further points out that “the domestic presences of organized and sustained social mobilization as well as the presence of democratic institutions or a significant degree of democratization are critical factor that condition the broader impacts of growing transnational contentious politics...” in terms of transnational environmental struggles against developmental projects including big dam projects (Khagram 2005, p. 20).

In a democratic context, the collective mobilizations of people be very they in the form of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), human right groups and welfare associations have much more autonomy to do their work since a democratic state is based upon the liberal philosophy that believes in the independent functioning of the civil society (Hall eds. 1992, p. 83). It does not view the functioning of such non-state actors a challenge to its authority and in many cases where the state capacity is weak, it encourages and even augments the strength of such actors to mobilize and organize people for a particular cause. This is perhaps why a greater degree of mobilization of people in terms of environmental movements steered by the NGOs and other grassroots groups is more likely to occur within the democratic framework. In addition, the transnational linkages that strengthen such campaigns by providing global platforms to the domestic collective are also best possible in the democratic situations (Wet 2005, p. 2056).

In contrast, development activities, it argues, like big dams building “are least likely to be altered... in states with authoritarian regimes [because] the domestic actors [such peoples’ voluntary groups and NGOs among others] have

little or no capacity to generate grassroots resistance” (Khagram 2005, p. 20). The states authorities in a non-democratic framework tend to discourage if not prohibit any collective and organized societal actions since such actions are generally viewed to be linked the political opposition and pose a threat to the prevailing political system (Xie eds. 2008, p. 141). Within such structure, the policy-making powers reside with their layer of top leadership and bureaucrats since they do not have to factor in the public opinion in their decision making process, they are hardly any opportunities for the people to organize and mobilize collective actions even when these are for a non-political cause. Hence a democratic structure, from this standpoint, appears more ‘open’ and ‘inclusive’ in nature because of its preference to human liberty and rights.

On the other hand, democratic institutions facilitate peaceful collective actions across the entire spectrum of the state and in societal initiatives including the developmental agenda and environmental domain because such organized efforts in a democratic regime are duly recognized by the constitution and the state (Khagram 2005, p. 139). In other words, democratic political setups as compare to the authoritarian ones provide much better opportunities to the grassroots groups and vulnerable sections in the society to mobilize public opinion with a variety of tools and platforms such as that of media available to them. Clearly, the greater degree of democratization entails a greater degree of social mobilization within a society upon which the effectiveness of any environmental movement depends. Though it should be noted that the presence of democratic mechanisms and a greater degree of social mobilization are not the only conditions that ensures the success of environment movement, other factors such as energetic leadership, strong ideology, cohesive organizational structure, and so on also play a vital role.

3. Anti-dam Movements in India and China

The anti-dam movements in both India and China emerged largely because of the uneven developmental policies pursued by these states. Such movements have, in fact, contributed much to this debate on balancing the developmental goals with the need for environmental protection. As argued earlier, this paper is centred around the two most globally known anti-dam movements mobilized in the in the mid-1980s, that is the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) what sought to halt the construction of Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada River in India and anti-dam movement organized against the Three Gorges dam in China. The former primarily sought to replace the prevailing mode of ‘destructive development’ with a ‘socially just’ and ‘ecologically sustainable’ mode of development while the latter was largely aimed at constructing a ‘new society’ in China by radically restructuring the whole existing political and socio-

economic structure (NBA 1992; Khagram 2005; and Lin 2007). From this standpoint, the Chinese anti-dam movement possessed a character of 'political action' which sought to mobilize support against the communist regime for democratizing its political institutions. That is probably because the people in authoritarian regimes seldom get a chance to question or even engage with the government and therefore, when they have such opportunity, they wish to utilize it for attaining long-term objectives, that is, democratization of their political apparatus. In both cases, the state authorities made a strong case that these projects would prove to be beneficial and valuable for the society as a whole, and pave the way for nation's rapid development and progress. On the other side, from the outset, both big dam projects were severally criticized by scholars and activists alike in the domestic and international arena on the accounts of their egregious ecological and socio-economic impacts. Characterizing such developmental models as an 'anti-people' and 'capitalist-oriented' developmental agenda of the government, they suggested an alternative Schumerian ideology - '*small is beautiful*' (Padaria et al. 2000, p. 9). They believed that massive ecological and socio-economic costs of big dams could have averted if the state authorities could plan small and medium-size hydro-projects to damming the river which would submerge less arable land, require fewer people to be displaced and involve less environmental risks, but New Delhi and Beijing simply arrogantly refused to take cognizance of such arguments or pay heed to their opponents and persisted in carrying forward the structural procedures for completing the construction of the dams.

There were three basic common reasons for the emergence of these anti-dam movements in both the countries. First, both governments did not provide a single opportunity to the people who were to be affected by the dam building; to voice their concerns in the decision-making process that shaped such developmental projects. Second, the resettlement and rehabilitation (R&R) policy offered by the Indian and Chinese states was poorly conceived and inadequate which led to much discontent among the people. Lastly, these projects were widely viewed as having been designed to mainly serve the interests of the dominant socio-political elites at the cost of millions of poor people and of course at the cost of countries serve environmental degradation (Baviskar 1995; Singh 1997; Thibodeau eds. 1998; Dreze et al. 1997; Khagram 2005; and Lin 2007).¹ Rather than being a mere spectator, the project-affected people in both countries decided to oppose the state-led development projects.

¹ The landed elites, industrial bourgeoisie, professionals and educated sections of the populace were expected to be the prime beneficiaries of the dam building in India while in the case of China, it was the bureaucratic managerial elites and foreign business and industrial classes.

When the people who stood to be evicted started resisting and mobilizing support through peaceful collective actions against these projects, the ruling regimes in both New Delhi and Beijing resorted to a whole range of brutal and coercive methods to silence the dissenting voices of the protestors. Their responses included public humiliation of and at times, indefinite detention of those spearheading the movement, police violence for forcible eviction of the indigenous people living in the those areas were to face submergence on account of the building of the dam (NBA 1992; Barber eds. 1993; Baviskar 1995; Kumar 1996; Singh 1997; and Thibodeau eds. 1998). Since these movements were primarily viewed as creating hurdles in the timely completion of state-led development projects which were considered vital to accelerate their economic growth rates and hence the policy of suppression. For instance: on May 1992, more than 170 members of Democratic Youth Party' involved in protests against a forced resettlement at Kai County in China—one of the poorest areas affected—were arrested and accused of carrying out counter revolutionary activities against the state and disrupting the smooth progress of the Three Gorges Project. Afterwards, there was no word about their fate in the public domain (Human Right Report 1995, pp. 12-13). Similarly, in the context of India, a dharna was organised at Bijasen village of Seoni district in 1985 to pressurize the government but when the dialogue between government and the campaigners broke down, police lathi-charged the activists and arrested a number of people including women and children, and the area around the submergence zone turned into a police camp (Kumar 1996, pp. 2666-2667). There were many such incidents of brutality reported in both India and China. In this way, from the outset, the state authorities in both the states had deployed strong arm tactics in the affected area to suppress the anti-dam movements.

At the same time, the dam builders in both cases also failed to provide a fair and better relocation and rehabilitation (R&R) packages for those being evicted due to the construction of dam, and take into account concerns raised by the activists waging such movements at the grassroots level (Singh 1997 and Thibodeau 1998). The only difference was perhaps in relative terms or account of the authoritarian nature of the Chinese political system that helps explain the latter's brutal suppression of the Three Gorges anti-dam movement. The Indian state like Chinese failed to recognize that such development projects needed to better take into account the issues and concerns of those who were going to be displaced by the dams. Though, unlike China, India provided ample opportunities to people to collectively organize themselves, and even NBA was also freely allowed to operate its peaceful activities and procedures.²In a

² For a detailed analysis see, Vasudha Dhagamwar, "The NGO Movement in the Narmada Valley: Some Reflection," in Jean Dreze, (et al.), (1997), *The Dam and the Nation: Displacement and*

nutshell, both the anti-dam movements though mobilized in radically different political context, yet met the same fate. Both failed to achieve their ultimate objective of stopping the construction of their respective dams and their supporters were rather brutally suppressed by the successive regimes in New Delhi and Beijing respectively. In a democratic polity in particular, the state is expected to act in favour of the whole society and utilize the resources in such a way so as to enhance and augment the common public good. In reality, however, the state authorities in India seem to have used coercive methods to divert the resources of the poor and marginalized tribal populations to those who already control the bulk of resources and capital. This is perhaps way Ramachandra Guha, a renowned environmentalist and historian, writes that “India has become effectively organised as a democracy of omnivores, for the omnivores and by the omnivores—the real beneficiaries of economic development who also have the clout of state power to ensure that the goodies come to them cheap, if not altogether free... The omnivores who constitute only 1/6th of India’s population, can capture the nation’s resources by using the state apparatus, while passing on the costs of resource capture to the rest of the population” (cited in Behera 2002, p. 63). Hence, popular participation and the protection of basic human rights of all that are considered to be the utmost governing ideals of a democracy were completely lacking in the case of the Sardar Sarovar Project. Baviskar aptly points out this contradictory nature of the democratic state of India by noting that the Narmada Bachao Andolan “has shown that the state, and present political process of which it is part, is fundamentally undemocratic and violates the right of the people in the valley... the violent response of the government to the Andolan clearly revealed the true nature of the state as elitist and authoritarian” (Baviskar 1995, p. 224). Thus it can be argued that democracy is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to pursue a sustainable and environment sensitive development agenda. This is evident from the treatments meted out to the Narmada Bachao Anodal in democratic polity like that of India. Though, unlike China, the Indian state allowed the whole range of civil society mobilization and NGOs to make their case against the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam and freely organize protest against governmental decision to this end. There is little doubt that at the same time, the state authorities did not shy away from suppressing the movement through several tactics.

Furthermore, the NBA has outlived the cause of its initial mobilization and persevered in its agenda of opposing the construction of big dams in the Narmada Valley and continued its struggle against the forced displacement and destructive developmental policies of the Indian state. As

Resettlement in Narmada Valley, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 96.

recently as in the month of June 2013 *The Times of India* recorded a public warning issued by the NBA to the India government that if it “refused to meet their [oustees of the Indira Sagar, Omkareshwar, Maheshwar, Maan and Upper Beda dams] legitimate demands and provide them their just due, the struggle would intensify in the Narmada Valley” (Singh 2013. p. 1). This shows that even today civil society groups like the Narmada Bachao Andolan rather than the democratic state of India continues to provide platform to the unheard voices and fight for justice of the marginalized and downtrodden sections of the society.

4. Concluding Remarks

This study had set out to interrogate a key supposition of the existing scholarly literatures on the social movements including those who advocate the cause of environmental preservation. It states that these movements stand a better chance of success in a democratic political system as compared to an authoritarian one because democracies provide more, better and systematic avenues to their citizens to participate in the collective decision making processes. The main findings of this paper yield a qualified response to this query. It shows that while the democratic polity of India undoubtedly allowed people of the Narmada Valley to fully arrange them, seek popular support of the NGOs operating in an independent domain to launch a sustained campaign against the building of the Sardar Sarovar dam, unlike the situation in China. Where authoritarian exercised an iron hand in first of all closely controlling the process of registration of the numbers of NGOs that were allowed to operate in the domestic sphere especially those working in the environmental sector and then in using the might of the state to suppress the dissenting voices and even punishing those who tried to mobilize the people to take part in the anti-dam movement against the Three Gorges Project (Lin 2007). The difference in the two states response towards the anti-dam movement, however, ends here. Beyond this point, the state authorities in both India and China responded in a similar fashion to the both anti-dam movements. The democratic Indian state and its authorities failed to engage the protesters and the NBA in particular in any serious dialogue. On the contrary, the state used force and coercive methods to silence them. While popular participation in decision making is considered as one of the main pillars of a democratic state, the Indian state in the context of Sardar Sarovar Project had failed to provide any such opportunity to the oustees. Narmada Bachao Andolan underlined a major contradiction embedded in the democratic state of India which did not hesitate in taking authoritarian measures for safeguarding their own interests and that of their allies in the name of development for all.

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