

## The Evolution of Ecological Consciousness: A Political Issue

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### Abstract

The paper involves an attempt to focus on the question of how sustainable development became a political issue. The path to discuss the ideology and its growth as a political concern leads to an emphasis over its origin. First, an attempt to trace the ecological sentiments back to the dawn of the Neolithic or Paleolithic times where people respected nature and had a more caring and responsive view and how and how they establish harmonious practices for resource management. Second, the emphasis on some of the most dangerous and threatening exercises by the biologists through their books. Thirdly, is the phase of the late 20th century when intense use of land, industrialization, over population etc. became a source of origin for ecological consciousness. The individual and international conditions and impacts in the 20th century are supported by some examples. Industrialization and capitalism was a main cause for the evolution of ecological consciousness as it focused on profit generation and consumerism gradually over populating the humans and eventually becoming threat to their well being. Further an attempt is made to trace the conditions in India and the relation between poverty and ecological degradation is explained and simplified. Later the question about the comprehension of ecological damages with the decreasing availability of natural resources is been dealt with help of some examples

The desire is to answer the question of how the idea of sustainable development and ecological consciousness became political that is how this issue being social, economic and scientific turned out to be a political issue or how the people became politically active and felt the need for their deliberate action over the concern

The dilemma of limited natural resources and their exploitation due to unending human aspirations for growth and development has also raised the question whether the natural capital stock which includes environment and other natural resources will be affected by these human aspirations.

Therefore the paper is to make people aware about how certain evolution of ecological consciousness has been emerging to be a political issue by referring to the origin, evolution and related social complications.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development, Politics, Ecological Sentiments, Harmonious Practices, Natural Resources, Exploitation

## 1. Introduction

Ecologism draws attention to an imbalance in the relationship between humans and the natural world that is manifest in a growing catalogue of threats to the well-being of both.<sup>1</sup> The idea also questions and transcends the limited focus of western political thought and is the only one after globalization to deal to a world philosophy. As scientific study has proceeded, the multiple interdependencies between the different organic species on the planet and the crucial impact of climatic and geological influences have become clear to us in a way that was not obvious to earlier generations.<sup>2</sup> The way the particular word ecology is perceived is according to its daunting and specialized character in the mainstream sciences and the scientific approach to the movement and ideology as a whole can limit the political stance hidden in the word itself. The ecology movement in fact overlaps with and often embodies ideas which might be described as conservative or authoritarian.<sup>3</sup> When ecologism seen scientifically, it focuses on the coexistence of humans as well as animals and plants as biotic along with the abiotic part of our environment. There is a need to interlink ecologism to our personal and local lives in order to justify our unjust use and our efforts of discrimination to the next generations. This complex global/local/individual perspective is, in one sense, quite unique among ideologies.<sup>4</sup>

Global Sustainable development is defined as a Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs<sup>5</sup>, as stated by the united nations, which also states three pillars of sustainable development as ; economic, social and environmental development. It helps us realize that consistent growth is not forever as resources are limited and both environment and growth need to go hand in hand. The fact that we have also inherited these resources from our forefathers, the onus is on us as we give it to the upcoming generations in a way it was or better than what it is. Thus the ecological consciousness as a concern for sustainability is an important guide for human and governmental policies and actions for a better and wiser use of the available and limited resources.

The paper focuses on the question of how sustainable development became a

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<sup>1</sup> ANDREW HEYWOOD, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 191(Third edition published 2004)

<sup>2</sup> STEPHEN D. TANSY AND NIGEL JACKSON, *Politics The Basics* 106( Routledge 4TH edition)

<sup>3</sup> ANDREW VINCENT, *Modern Political Ideologies* 198 (A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication,3rd ed. 2010.)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> WARWICK, *Politics, International Studies and Global Sustainable Development*. Also available at [www2.warwick.ac.uk](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk).

political issue. The path to discuss the ideology and its growth as a political concern leads to an emphasis over its origin. First, an attempt to trace the ecological sentiments back to the dawn of the Neolithic or Paleolithic times where people respected nature and had a more caring and responsive view and how and how they establish harmonious practices for resource management. Second, the emphasis on some of the most dangerous and threatening exercises by the biologists through their books. Thirdly, is the phase of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when intense use of land, industrialization, over population etc. became a source of origin for ecological consciousness. The individual and international conditions and impacts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are supported by some examples. Industrialization and capitalism was a main cause for the evolution of ecological consciousness as it focused on profit generation and consumerism gradually over populating the humans and eventually becoming threat to their well being. Further an attempt is made to trace the conditions in India and the relation between poverty and ecological degradation is explained and simplified. Later the question about the comprehension of ecological damages with the decreasing availability of natural resources is been dealt with help of some examples.

## 2. Origins of Ecologism

Broadly there are three phases that reveals the question of the origin of the term ecology and the political stance it took over the period of time.

### 2.1. Palaeolithic or Neolithic Periods

The primal or tribal peoples were naturally more ecologically aware than us. Primal peoples are thus often accorded a kind of natural ancient wisdom which we would do well to rediscover<sup>6</sup>. An equilibrium between nature and human being is dynamic rather than static. The prevalent equilibrium was disturbed when the human species acted upon nature for products for consumption, transformation of agriculture and the domestication of animals. A new dynamic balance was reached between society and nature. The forested lands were converted into agrarian fields which were not only used for subsistence but also for producing timber for buildings, chariots, ploughs etc. The production was maintained by the Shudras for the crown. Further, a large number of communities were by now considered untouchables, were gradually edged away to the frontiers of areas controlled by agrarian societies and their ruling classes, where they continued to live by hunting and gathering.<sup>7</sup> Thus the imbalance was observed to be both of qualitative and quantitative nature. Thus the evolution of relationship between nature and society as environmental and social disequilibrium can even be said to be an intrinsic

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<sup>6</sup> ANDREW HEYWOOD, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 200 (Third edition published 2004)

<sup>7</sup> R, THAPAR, *op cit*, 56.

property of class society in general.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.2. Altered Imbalances

The period after the Second World War, 1945-62 is stated as the age of ecological innocence which first was recognized in the United States and then spread to the rest of the west. The instances and examples of the altered imbalances have been another issue for the origin of sustainable development being political. One of the best examples is the book by Rachel Carson, *SILENT SPRING* which provides many dreadful examples of how the environment has been damaged by the indiscriminate application of chemicals.<sup>9</sup> She suggested the idea of sustainable production and development. The various attempts of men to alter the face of the earth were alarming to biologists which made them bring some threatening aspects to public attention. Also Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) and Garrett Hardin's 'The Tragedy of the Commons' (1968) raised the spectre not only of environmental collapse but also of its relation to overpopulation.<sup>10</sup> Some other concerns such as the global awareness about the health risks in 1963 which concluded the ban of nuclear warhead testing in the atmosphere, growing concerns about sea pollution, acid rain. Some informal rules were initiated for the use of the sea as environment started to emerge as a global issue because some of these problems are inherently global as carbon dioxide emissions irrespective of where they are emitted. They contribute to global climate change. And other problems even if they are not global such as the emission of Sulphur dioxide taken by the winds to the other state, waste dumped in semi-enclosed and enclosed seas, soil erosion and degradation.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.3. Late in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The rise of problems stated in first two origins is a part of global political economy as they link to broader political and socio-economic processes. It was argued that environmental problems were linked to the unequal distribution of wealth and income. Therefore as government is an administrative unit of capitalist society, then those problems become instantly a political issue.<sup>12</sup> The third and most successful call for sustainable development as a political issue was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century wherein the capitalists were making the society as a source of wealth generation by forming a industrialist market. The intense use of land, industrialization, population growth suburban sprawl, pollution and urban decay also gave rise to the concerns for ecological consciousness and contributed to the idea of sustainable development.

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<sup>8</sup> D. RAGHUNANDAN, *Ecology and Consciousness*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 22, No. 13 (Mar. 28, 1987), pp. 545,546.

<sup>9</sup> LAMONT C. COLE, *Rachel Carson's indictment of the wide use of pesticides* Scientific American, Vol. 207, No. 6 (December 1962), pp. 173-180

<sup>10</sup> ANDREW HEYWOOD, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 200 (Third edition published 2004)

<sup>11</sup> *Why did the environment emerge as a political issue by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*. Also available at [http://platform.youngreporters.net/post/why\\_did\\_the\\_environment\\_emerge\\_as\\_a\\_political\\_issue\\_at\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_the\\_20th](http://platform.youngreporters.net/post/why_did_the_environment_emerge_as_a_political_issue_at_the_end_of_the_20th)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

The evolution of the term ecology inclined the political ecologists to suggest radical changes to our social habits and practices. Also they socially termed it as “ecological consciousness” as cognizent to the impact of production on the nature as a profoundly social phenomenon. The stress upon the ecological consciousness by the political ecologists was basically on two different points such as the consumption of goods by individuals in advanced industrial countries should be reduced and the claim that human needs are not still satisfied by the continuous economic growth neglecting the need for equal distribution of the limited resources and utilizing it according to our needs and our greed (individuals or nations). Different problems are perceived by different nations and individuals differently as deforestation has a bad impact on the people of different areas and classes. The people living in hilly areas are economically hindered as their long tradition of utilization of forest produce for fodder, pasture, shelter, medicine etc. and the impact to the people living in the outside immediate in the form of soil erosions, droughts, floods etc.

The concerns raised were often international such as the development of the growth of the federal rules and control on impacts of the commons in response to public outcry, environmental damage and concerns about health concerns and environmental quality in the United States. Clean water, clean air, and safe food became entwined with the greater concerns for managing, preserving, and protecting natural resources and their tangible and non-tangible values.<sup>13</sup>

### **3. Evolution of Consciousness**

#### **3.1. Capitalism and Industrialisation**

The profits were generated by the capitalists when they used government as administrative units for consumerism while promoting negative impact on the planet and to make industrialized countries’ citizens pay in form of taxes, new products, research etc. for the waste produced by the capitalists. The same was observed in US after the Second World War where the economy demanded to convert the buying and selling of goods to rituals and make consumption their way of life. "The main cause of environmental destruction in the world is the demand for natural resources generated by the consumption of the rich (whether they are rich nations or rich individuals and groups within nations)".<sup>14</sup> Thus consumerism of wasteful lifestyle and unjust use of the nature in the process of generation were not irrelevant or inessential factors but were a main and alarming cause.

The relationship of humans and earth was given a huge turn in the era of the industrial revolution. It was started in the 1700 where machines took over manual labor and the economy converted to capital intensive from a labor intensive form

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<sup>13</sup> *History of Sustainability*. Sustainability and the U.S. EPA (2011) National Academies Press, Washington, DC. (12 pages; pp 15-26)

<sup>14</sup> ANIL AGARWAL, op cit, p 366

of production unit. After 100 years the eventual amount of impact was noticed when the human population increased by about 57% to 700 million.<sup>15</sup> No blockage over the excessive growth of the population was present as altered medicines and living standards were results of the revolution. The exponential growth in the population resulted in the unrealistic and exponential requirements for the natural resources in the form of food, energy, housing, land and an increase in the waste by-products. The revolution in turn impacted the resources which were taken for granted by the humankind till then. The way to utilize the resources changed and ultimately the health of individuals was at stake. Later M. King Hubbert predicted in 1949 that the fossil fuel era would be very short-lived and that other energy sources would need to be relied upon.<sup>16</sup>

The industrialization was criticized because of its non environmental objectives as well as its contribution to the creation of difference in political terms. Even "Agriculture no more remained a culture, a way of life, but became a commercial proposition due to techniques of centralised industrial production".<sup>17</sup> However all forms of production led to the division of the population into different classes of the ruling and the oppressed ones. The ruling or the dominant class had a motive of greater production in order to ensure surpluses and no heed was and to the social impacts of this generation and to the nature. Same applies when there was no one to care when the Spanish planters in Cuba who burned forests on the slopes on the mountains and obtained high quality sufficient fertilizers for coffee plantations for one generation and then the heavy tropical rainfall subsequently washed away the unprotected the upper soil and left the bare rock behind.<sup>18</sup> But it can be assumed that the pre-capitalists in a micro context had successfully established norms and practices that were in harmony with the immediate available resources and their efficient utilization.

After the libertarian from colonial rule in the 1940s and 1950s, the developing nations aimed at urbanization for stimulation of better economic growth and social transformation of backward regions. Unintentionally and unexpectedly the effort for urbanization and social transformation through industrialization resulted as some social and ecological consequences such as the loss of traditional sustainable livelihoods, involuntary displacement of populations, marginalization of the locals and the increasing environmental pollution in the regions.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. Social Complications in India

Some of the drawbacks of the industrialization process wherein capitalists took natural resources for granted were traced back in India which led to poverty as unequal distribution of land and resources and raised the revolution a cause for

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<sup>15</sup> ERIC MCLAMB, *The Ecological Impact of the Industrial Revolution*. September 18, 2011

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> SUNDERLAL BAHUGUNA, 'Technology vs Ecology', Indian Express Magazine, February 9, 1986.

<sup>18</sup> F ENGELS, "Dialectics of Nature", p 183.

<sup>19</sup> RAJKISHORE MEHER, *The social and ecological effects of industrialisation in a tribal region: The case of the Rourkela Steel Plant*, SAGE Publications, New Delhi.

socioeconomic transformations. The issue of sustainable development was made political as the various interpretations were vague and few attempts were made for the palpability of the issue. One such attempt for the development in the third world countries aimed to improve the quality of life through actions focused on educational attainment, nutritional status, access to basic freedom and spiritual welfare etc.<sup>20</sup> these policies should last into future as well. The situations in the third world countries posed a problem to think about social sustainability along with ecological sustainability and neo-classical framework for development would be unsuccessful. The 'need' for sustainable development is affluence rather than basic, or opulence rather than squalor.<sup>21</sup> The problem arises when basic needs become a vital component of a development model which hinders the question of sustainability. As the basic factors which generate poverty are kept inside the purview of the framework, it can be assumed that "*as poverty increases, natural environments are degraded and when environments degrade, the prospects for further livelihood decrease, environmental degradation generates more poverty, thus accelerating the cycle*"<sup>22</sup>. Thus a simple concept of the cyclical relationship between poverty and environmental degradation is understood. In sum, the ecological problems cannot be well understood with sectional prospective, the requirement for holistic understanding and solutions fundamentally addressing social processes and transformations at the global era. The strategy for radical transformation of the mode of production which causes the environmental degradation should be the subject of discourse on ecology with social problems, be the structure of the global system, unending struggle by the oppressed classes to overthrow the affluent and its relationship to those over natural resources in specific locales.

As stated above about the condition of people living in hilly areas, a recent well documented example which provides better appreciation to the question of decreasing availability of natural resources and the comprehension of ecological damages and also shows that an ecological consciousness is not always necessary even in communities wholly dependent on the maintenance of ecological balance in their environment.. A battle against mechanised fishing vessels such as trawlers and purse seiners is being observed by the agitations of the traditional artisanal fisher people in coastal Kerala. The industrial revolution in form of the technological inputs became a threat for economic growth of the fishermen. It led to over fishing and destruction of fish breeding locations resulting in severe depletion of marine stock. When compared to the traditional practice of fishing from 200 years was different. The nets used by the locals were of different sizes for different catch whereas the mechanical vessels used a single type of net which trapped fishes as well as their eggs affecting the diversity as it deteriorated reproduction. As an evidence, these popular struggles is a proof when they

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<sup>20</sup> DAVID PEARCE et al, op cit, p 1.

<sup>21</sup> K. R. NAYAR *Politics of 'Sustainable Development'*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 29, No. 22 (May 28, 1994), pp. 1327-1329

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

articulate acquire an explicit ecological content, it derives strength and draws sustenance from issues such as curtailment of traditional rights and expropriation of traditionally accessible natural resources.

Another example is the Chipko movement which was triggered by the supply of ash wood for the manufacture of the sports goods which was traditionally being used by the locals for making ploughs.<sup>23</sup> Concerns of resisting tribal population for irrigation and power projects which forced them to migrate leaving their cultural land and expected those people to drastically change their lives without sufficient compensation.

These movements raised a political question of how should the environment be used and who should use it and benefit from it.<sup>24</sup> These examples as struggles on environmental issues integrated with the call for social transformation and the scientific enterprises have helped for the evolution of socially rational and appropriate technological society. This was an attempt to strip away the layers of capacity which prevents objective perception of reality.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper has attempted to answer the question of how the idea of sustainable development and ecological consciousness became political that is how this issue being social, economic and scientific turned out to be a political issue or how the people became politically active and felt the need for their deliberate action over the concern. The issue first found to be recognized when the term ecology was been identified during various periods such as the Paleolithic or Neolithic times when people despite of abundance in resource had a concern over the use of the judicial and wise use of the available resources followed by the era of World War 2 and the 20<sup>th</sup> century industrial revolution. The capitalists and industrialists use the government as administrators and fulfilled their aim of profit generation and consumerism. In 1800s, after 100 years the deceiving intent of the revolution was noticed which later was identified as a cause for tremendous population growth and health hazards. The population growth resulted in more need for natural resources and thus led to their exploitation. The revolution also turned out to be socioeconomically affecting as the oppressive classes and the privileged used the natural resources unjustly and a call for a better and equitable social transformation was urged in the world by the developing countries from the developed ones and in India by the people who were socially, culturally and economically hampered by the industrial revolution, for example tribal groups, fishermen in Kerala, nomadic in the hilly regions etc. These struggles were a support to the claim made by the ecologists and the biologists about the question of limited resources and comprehension of ecological damages. In the context of India, the socially underprivileged sections and their agitations towards the capital intensive economy help us to understand the relation between the

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<sup>23</sup> ANIL AGARWAL, *op cit*, p 368.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* pg 363



ecological degradation and poverty. There is a need to understand fundamental social processes at the global level in a holistic manner rather than a sectional approach towards such an alarming political issue. We cannot reverse the whole ecological degradation but we can at least reduce it by ways of reusing and recycling. We can aim at a radical transformation of the mode of production which hampers the conditions of the earth. The attempt to look for solutions other than holistic ones located within social formations is historical idealism serving only to strengthen the permanent ideologies of the world capitalistic system.

The research about the evolution of sustainable development compels me to think deeply to the question of how efficient would be the radical transformation for a better sustainability, will it be the function of only the governments and authorities of various regions or it will be the coordinated and cooperative functions of both the human resource and the authorities. The dilemma of limited natural resources and their exploitation due to unending human aspirations for growth and development raises the question whether the natural capital stock which includes environment and other natural resources will be affected by these human aspirations (quality of life or satisfaction of basic needs)?