

Environment : Management and Mismanagement

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Environmental Management is a misnomer in the Indian context, given the scenario of degradation of its rich and diverse natural endowments! The concepts of ecology and environment were unknown till the nineteen seventies, but conservation was inherent in the life style till the second world war. Thereafter, the eighties signalled the entrance of the World Trade Organisation, global market forces and transnational corporations. This unleashed an unbridled spree of consumerism accompanied by over-exploitation of its life-support system in India. Obviously, this paved the way for unsustainable and inequitable development for the benefit of a miniscule affluent minority. Predictably, this widened the rural-urban gap with adverse socio-economic fallout.

It was the United Nations Conference on Environment at Stockholm in 1972 that evoked global awareness. Paradoxically, India was one of the first developing countries to introduce environmental management! The salutary intervention of Late Indira Gandhi at this conference led to the enactment of several regulatory mechanisms. She specifically called for re-evaluation of sanctioned projects that included the controversial Silent Valley & Tehri Dam projects.

The Department of Science & Technology (DST) served as the nodal agency with a National Committee for Environmental Planning & Co-Ordination (NCEPC) for policy level dictates. An Environment Cell within the DST assisted in the formulation of rules and regulations for facilitating environment management.

In the context of world-wide arid & semi-arid problems, the DST responded positively with the formation of a National Preparatory Committee of experts to prepare a Country Report for the UN Desertification Conference at Nairobi in 1977. A high level Indian delegation attended the Nairobi congregation, as well as the Conference on Alternatives for Desert development at Sacramento. A Working Group for Integrating Environmental Concerns in Mining was constituted as well. In 1981, its report—based on field visits and deliberations—led to the formulation of guidelines related to environmental problems in mining operations.

The Department of Environment (DOE), was created in 1980 “...to ensure environmental protection, to carry out environmental impact studies of proposed development projects, and to have administrative responsibility for pollution monitoring and control....” Increased awareness about wildlife and forests led to the enlargement of DOE in 1989 into the Ministry of Environment & Forests (MOEF).

Realising the hazards of water pollution, a legislation for Prevention and Control of Water Pollution was enacted in 1981. Pollution Control Boards with considerable regulatory and punitive powers were constituted at the level of the Centre and States; this legislation was later modified to include air pollution as

well. For urban and industrial sectors, this still remains one of the most potent environmental legislations.

In addition, there is a surfeit of legislations dealing with specific components of the environmental matrix, which indirectly add up towards conservation. The earliest such enactment was the Smoke Nuisance Act in 1987; followed much later by several others: Fisheries; River Management Boards; Inter-State water disputes; and preservation of Ancient Monuments and Archaeological sites. However enactments for Wildlife Protection; Forest (Conservation); Environmental (Protection) and Biological Diversity are directly environment related. Thus, instruments were abundantly available, but without either the will or a viable regulating machinery. The beneficiaries, comprising the vast majority of the Indian people, have never been involved in the process!

A fairly comprehensive administrative machinery did exist at the Central Governmental level for Environmental Impact Assessment and Appraisal Committees related to River Valley & Hydroelectric; Mining; and Industrial projects since the early eighties. There are also a number of policy declarations and guidelines circulated by the Central Government :

- Preparation of Detailed Project Report of Irrigation and Multi-Purpose Projects
- Environment and Mining
- Environmental Impact of Water Resource Projects, Central Board of Irrigation and Power, 1986
- Status Report of Monitored Pro-jects, Central Water Commission
- National Land Use Policy
- National Water Policy
- National Forest Policy
- Guidelines for Environmental Impact Assessment of River valley Projects, 1989 (third update)
- National Conservation Strategy; Policy Statement on Abatement of Pollution
- Tribal Rights Bill (with community rights for forest protection); and
- National Environment Policy (NEP)

This clearly shows that environmental mismanagement in India is not due to a lack of wherewithal or policy diktats. It stems from a lack of concern about environmental issues in the echelons of power; and the attitude of equating 'Construction' and 'Development'. The bureaucratic system controls the committees for environmental appraisal and clearance with hardly any scope for independence; this, unfortunately, is a colonial hangover!

Even during better times, the statutory environmental appraisal system was considered to be an unavoidable evil even by Government or Public Sector organisations. It was the onus of the project authorities to arrange for an Environment Impact Assessment (EIA). With clearance accorded on the basis of mere promises, they often provided inadequate or concocted information. There was no statutory monitoring organisation in the overall system. Basically, the immensely powerful development lobby considers India to be their "Private Limited" assets, and the entire environmental clearance system a purchasable commodity. Fortunately, a few environmentalists in those committees together

with exceptional technocrats committed to environmental issues, could enable some harmful projects to be stalled!

In fact, the 2008 NEP hands over the business of environmental appraisal, and clearance to the lobby of Development by Construction! Moreover, the appraisal committees are totally bereft of independent environmentalists. There are more clauses in the new policy that makes environmental management untenable. For instance : Appraisal for expanding ongoing projects not required; projects below Rupees fifty Crores relegated to the respective states and their committees, who shall naturally be driven by pulls and local vested interests ;etc.

The environmental components transcend political boundaries; and, therefore, obviously cannot be dealt within the limitations of States or Project boundaries. Moreover Water and Land are also within the environmental matrix ; having separate policies for each of these with a separate one for environment would become counter-productive and engender conflicts.

However, there are a few positive aspects of the currently emerging situation. The statutory requirement for public hearing is a step forward, provided that these are not manipulated without adequate efforts to enable the stakeholders to attend.

The Supreme Court has recently mandated environmental science courses with examinations in high school and college curricula. This shall sensitise future generations about protecting the environment. In fact, it is only with the active participation of the future generations that proper environmental management may become a reality.

Public Interest Litigations (PIL) are being increasingly filed to seek judicial intervention against environmental damage; and even against ecological regulations. During recent years a spate of Court decisions, without the benefit of expert advice, have enabled the development lobby to go on the rampage with impunity against possible environmental degradation.

However, in the global perspective of urgency on sustainability to reduce the deadly emissions through numerous protocols and conferences culminating in Copenhagen (COP 15) last December, even India has met the date-line for declaring substantial emission reductions within the next few decades! The UPA II Government at the national level has already initiated administrative measures for the purpose. However, it has to be realised that this may be possible only by effective and legally binding environmental assessment with involvement of the communities at the grassroots. Fortunately, their level of awareness of the impending danger is substantially enhanced!

To turn the tide towards environmental management, the following steps may be considered :

A) Honorary Environmental Counsellors embracing various disciplines linked to environmental issues, be empanelled for benefit of consultations by exalted judicial institutions. Only their travelling, boarding & lodging have to be arranged. After all, India has no dearth of such experienced citizens who want to share their experience. There should, however, be a caveat that such persons should neither be attached to a consultancy organisation operating in the realm of EIA project preparation nor be a functionary of a developmental

agency, department or corporate body. The process could be crystallised by public notification.

- B) Currently, members with vested interests influence project clearance either way. In fact, this has vitiated the entire system and has become a highly contentious environmental issue in India. The Committees for different sectors must have a greater representation from civil society—experts; reputed activists of voluntary organisations; and social scientists. Presently, they are loaded with government representatives having a stake in such projects!
- C) Local committees should be constituted—to also function as neighbourhood vigilante groups - with the mandatory inclusion of representatives from the local community or democratic local self-government institutions to closely monitor the progress of implementation of the environmental components.
- D) Regional environmental sensitivity reports should be prepared for potential project zones mining, river basins, industrial/urban agglomerations. These may serve as a 'carrying capacity' evaluation based on the broad Indian natural regions. This shall fit individual projects into regional environmental sensitivity mosaic.

These measures shall conform to the yeomen role played by crusading voluntary organisations like Narmada Bachao Andolan, Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishat; and the initiatives of trailblazers like Medha Patkar, Rajendra Singh, Sundarlal Bahuguna and Chandiprakash Bhat in bringing environmental issues to the thought process of both rural and urban Indian citizens. In view of the impending, self-destructive environmental degradation, including global warming, this may be the light at the end of the tunnel. □□□