

Civil Society and Environmentalism in India: The Role of Citizen Elites

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Abstract

Individuals lead struggles and movements. The way they approach and raise the issues influences the discourse of civil society. Often there is implicit tension between individual self-seeking interests and group interest. This conflict of interest determines the nature of struggle lead by individuals. Those who stand by the ideals of fraternity and community interest, forsaking the self-interest, are the 'Citizen Elites' furthering the role civil society in a democratic setup. They also influence the nature of State in resource allocation and thereby detrimental for public policy also. Based on Dipanker Gupta concept of 'Citizen Elite', this paper seeks to emphasize the role of such individuals who despite adverse circumstances struggle for environmental justice in India. Such individuals lead movements have far reaching lessons for democracy and public policy.

Keywords: Civil society, Environmentalism, Citizen Elites, Movements

1. Introduction

The modern conception of environmentalism is new to globe. With the advent of industrialization and exploitation of natural resources some thinkers like Ruskin, Mumford and others questioned the model of industrial development in the west. Guha in his famous book "Environmentalism- A Global History", mentioned two waves of environmentalism at global level. The Ist wave of environmentalism was at the onset of industrialization i.e. in the last decades of eighteenth century with water and forest conservation as the main focus in North America and Europe. More recent, the second wave initiated in nineteen sixties in which environmentalism emerges as a popular movement (Guha, 2014, p. 4). It appeared as part of politics and popularity at world level in 1960s after the publication of Rachel Carson – "Silent Spring" and E.F Schumacher- "Small Is Beautiful". It is only during this period various movements influence the popular politics, like the start of Green movement, and actualized themselves as part of public policy.

One key difference between the environmentalism of the west and India is that in West the love, protection and conservation of nature were the defining values. However in India it was born out of the struggle for survival, livelihood and contestation on control over natural resources. This is the only reason why Guha and others termed it as the "environmentalism of

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the poor” (Guha & Alier, 2006). However the question is more complicated when it comes to development in India. It is a constant tug of war between development on the one hand and environmental concerns on the other (Madhavan & Narayana, 2020). It is here that the linkage between civil society, development and environmentalism can be discerned. The institutional reforms introduced in 1990s shifted the economy towards neo-liberalism that accentuate state’s withdrawal of spending in social sector and letting market assume the role of the state in providing services, employment and resources to people (Tandon & Mohanty, 2003, p. 10). In developing countries, where the state was starved of resources, the space left by the state was facilitated through structural adjustment programmes. World Bank and other western countries began to support NGOs labeling them as civil society organizations as a part of development aid (Shah, 2018). This is one version of civil society.

Another version of civil society, also termed as the Radical Civil-Society by Ghanshyam Shah (2018, p. 22), deciphered the discourse put forward by international donor agencies and reconstructed their own version of civil society. Although smaller in size and has less impact on society it confront the state and strive to change the power relationship in society. It is this version of civil society which has been appreciated in this paper.

2. Civil society and Environmentalism in India

The initial years after independence see a stark enthusiasm for industrial development in India. Based on the principles of mixed economy the commanding heights, encouraged by the ideas of J.L Nehru, considered heavy industry and dams as the ‘temples of modern India’. It can be deciphered by the aphorism of first five-year plan which noted that underdevelopment was characterized by the ‘co-existence , in greater or less degree, of unutilized or underutilized manpower on the one hand and of unexploited natural resources on the other’ (Planning Commission, n.d). In the initial years the experts presented the environment as something to be controlled and conquered (D’souza, 2012).

Early 1970’s marked a watershed movement for official recognition of environmental concerns in India. The fifth five year plan formally acknowledged, in its foreword, the developmental insensibilities meted out to the environment. The government actively began the processes of environmental legislations. It was only after the return of Indira Gandhi return from UN conference on Human, environment and development in Stockholm in 1972 that several legislations came into existence (Ghosh, 2018). A National Environmental Planning and Co-ordination Committee was formed under the leadership of B P Pal. In 1972, the Central Pollution Control Board was set up followed by the state boards. The department of environment came into existence on November 1, 1980 followed by state departments. Environmental laws on water (1974), air (1981) and forest conservation (1981) were passed, as also the umbrella act of Environment Protection (1986). An Environment Policy and Strategy Statement was issued in the year of the UN Conference on Environment and Development in 1992.

It is however interesting to know that it was during 1970’s various Civil Society movements witnessed their presence on environmental issues. Civil Society gradually made its impact on governance which is exemplified from numerous civil society movements since independence. The period of 1970s and after saw a plethora of social movements against

dams, industries and mines. These movements questioned the logic of development and demanded that the state recognize people's ownership and control over their sustenance resources and environment. The Chipko movement in the hills of the western Himalayas to save the forest from commercial exploitation, the movement in Narmada valley to stop the gigantic multipurpose Sardar Sarovar project, the movement in Chilika to save the lake from the commercial culturing of prawns, and the movement against the nuclear power plant in Kaiga are some instances of people questioning the state's developmental logic and actions. The nature, scope and organization of each movement vary based on the issue on which the civil society is functioning. From water pollution, air pollution and movements against toxic emissions of industries to deforestation and displacement, civil society organizations are working relentlessly. As a key stakeholder within the domain of Environmental Governance, civil society influenced the actions and outcomes of regulatory processes, mechanisms and organizations in addition to state, market and communities.

What emerged after this churning process was the consensus at governmental level whereby 'developmental initiatives rather than being comprehensively abandoned were instead sought to be inclined towards accommodating ecological sensibilities' (D'souza, 2012, p. 2). A paradigm shift was seen with India adopting new economic policies in 1991. It is during this period the 'environmentalist had gone from being seen as capitalist cronies to being damned as socialist stooges' (Guha, 2013). This consensus was also contested by some individuals at Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), a non-governmental organization, like Anil Aggarwal, Sunita Narain and other in their periodic reports. Such views were also supported by intellectuals like Ramachandra Guha, Vandana Shiva, Shiv Visvanathan, Mahashweta Devi, Madhav Gadgil and others. On ground were the activists who blended the thoughts and inspirations from difference source and played the role of 'Citizen Elites'. Most of them, inspired by Gandhian thoughts, linked local environmental problems with the national and global problems of environment and ecology.

3. The concept of 'Citizen Elite': Democracy's Artists

The concept of 'Citizen Elite' is proposed by sociologist Dipanker Gupta in his book "Revolution from above-India's future and the Citizen Elite". Contrary to the popular belief that democracies are made by people he thinks that they are fragile and 'need exceptional people with vision' (Gupta, 2013, p. 18). He believes that democracies have always been sustained by exceptional vision of individuals who forsaking their self-interests and caustically stood for democracy. It has been done 'by the elites, for the Citizens, of the citizens' (p. 21). The citizen elite always strive to change what is given. They are the 'artist of democracy' because to sustain democracy the elites have to device strategies and tactics to change the given status quo. The citizen elites are the real democrats who 'think beyond the given' and are fired by the 'ideals of citizenship whose core attribute is that of fraternity' (p. 10). Their purpose will be to establish a regime where fraternity rules (p. 15). He firmly believes that the citizen elites should favor 'universal' policies in place of the 'targeted' ones because they benefit everyone. With regard to India he thinks that there are 'the business elite, the professional elite, the real state elite the old and new moneyed elite but they are all looking after their own interests.... and are unaware of how crucial fraternity' (p. 37).

Not every elite fits into this. His are the 'elite of calling'. His idea of Elites is different from Nietzsche's superman, Pareto's lions and Vanguard of Lenin on the basis of commitment to periodic elections where people can judge their worth (p. 16). His 'elites come from a well-to-do background, if actually not rich', but 'are exceptional individuals'. However, 'middle-class individuals can also be elite but they were to go against the given'. Gupta places Louis Bonaparte, Otto Von Bismarck and Mao Zedong under the category of citizen elite however other may include Earl Grey, Robert Peel, Richard Cross and Henry Brougham. They force the state to 'deliver public services like Health, education and energy, at quality levels, regardless of class, caste, race and religion' (p. 24). Gupta and Pushkar (2015) appropriately used the concept of "citizen elite" in their study while inquiring why low-income group do not demand better health and other public services which have adverse effect on their health. Among other findings they proposed that one way of claiming such service is the active intervention of "better situated individuals" (similar as Citizen Elites) and groups. They argued that these 'better situated individuals and groups challenge dominant discourses, propose competing ideas, mobilize people and inspire confidence among low-income groups' (p. 68).

The concept of citizen elites anticipates a preview of civil society which is based on group interest inspired by the value of fraternity and equality in spite of the self-seeking interests which pursue individual glorification and fame. If applied on the environmental movements in India, it encompasses only those environmental movements which draw upon the idea of universality and fraternity. Here are some citizen elites, may rightly called as eco-warriors, from India who throughout their life lived for environmental movement. There may be many more unknown figures, in history and present, but the following four are presented as prototype to understand the importance and role of citizen elite in the field of environment.

4. Citizen Elites for Environmental Justice in India

4.1 Gandhi and his ideas: Ramachandra Guha considers Gandhi as an early environmentalist. Although he was not an environmentalist in the modern sense but he is considered as apostle to environmentalism in India. We are familiar with famous aphorism of Gandhi that 'The world has enough for everybody's need, but not enough for one person's greed'. This statement represent Gandhi's complete understanding and vision about the way he approached the question of environment in industrial model of development which was introduced in India during colonial period. He 'decisively rejected industrialization as an option for India' (Guha, 2016). He practiced it himself till the last with very few things he owned. His idea of 'Village Republic' was a moral and ecological response to the industrial model of the west. His views were based on non-materialistic and non-exploitative worldview that underscores interdependence between humans and the nature (Moolakkattu, 2019).

The most important influence of Gandhi's ideas on post independence environmental movement is that his method of *non-violent satyagraha*, was adopted by various environmental movement. Best examples of such forms of struggle includes the Chipko movement in Garwal region, the pluck and plant satyagraha against Karnataka Pulpwoods Limited in Karnataka, the Silent Valley movement in Kerala, the Narmada Bachao Andolan,

the Plachimada movement against Coca-Cola limited, the Jal-satyagraha of Khandwa district in Madhya Pradesh etc.

4.2 Sunderlal Bahuguna and the Chipko Movement

It was the Chipko movement which startled the modern environmental movement in India. It was not just a movement against felling of trees but a representative of a wide spectrum of natural resource conflicts in 1970s and 1980s (Guha, 2013). The prime focus of the movement was environmental degradation, deforestation and gender issues. Later on the movement also accommodated the issues of economic exploitation and ecology. Inspired by the Gandhian ideas Bahuguna had two themes in mind (James, 2013). One was the establishment of 'community based organizations to support sustainable, economically independent village'; another was the 'condition of forest on which village communities were dependent' (p. 121). In May 1978 at Gaumukh, where the Bhagirathi has its source, he took a pledge to devote himself throughout his life for the protection of Himalayan environment (p. 122). He brings the movement into prominence through 5000 km of trans-Himalayan marches. During and after the Chipko movement Satyagraha and padyatras (foot marches) were his main Gandhian methods to organize people across the Himalayan region. His vision can be seen in the slogan he gave during the movement that the 'ecology is permanent economy'. His contribution in Chipko movement and the struggle against Tihri Dam are well acknowledged. The approach and forms of struggle he used were later on replicated in various other environmental movements like the Appiko movement in Karnataka.

He was not alone in this movement. He was fully assisted by Chandi parsad Bhatt, a visionary, who later on utilized the lessons, learned from the movement into constructive works like reforesting barren hillsides and promoting renewable sources of energy like biogas plants and microhydel projects (Guha, 2008).

4.3 Mayilamma and the Plachimada movement

Mayilamma (1940-2007) was an illiterate tribal woman who got to international fame for her iconic leadership against extraction and pollution of water by the multinational giant Coca-Cola. She took on the innovative ways to expand the movement utilizing local culture, folklores and language. The movement took place in a small village Plachimada, falling in Perumatty panchayat of Palakkad district in Kerala. Most of the villagers were landless adivasis, making their living as agricultural wage laborers. The Coca-Cola Beverages limited was granted permission in January 2000 for setting up a bottling plant in the village. Problem aroused when the villagers found that most of wells in village went dry due to unrestricted extraction of water by the plant. Basically the plant required fifteen lakh liters of water on an average per day to meet its production requirements (Pariyadath, 2018). The Down to Earth magazine published a report in 2002 which reported that the parameters regarding water extraction had been breached and high electrical conductivity was the main reason of deterioration of water quality. It also revealed that the waste water was not fit for both human consumption and agricultural use. Moreover the villagers living in the vicinity started facing rashes and severe skin problems.

With these ill effects the movement in Plachimada started under the banner of the anti

coca-cola struggle committee. The movement mainly lead and joined by the females because in summers they have to trek long distances in search of drinking water. The movement involved on ground agitations, judicial and legislative proceedings. Huge rallies, numbering in thousands, were organized in and around Plachimada after the ill effects of the plant impacted physical health and socio-economic life the villagers. In April 2003 the Perumatty panchayat refused to renew the license. In December 2003 a single judge bench of Kerala high court upholds the panchayat's decision but later on in June 2005 high court directed the panchayat to grant license subject to restricted water extraction by the plant. Meanwhile the Kerala State Pollution Control Board asked the company to close down based on the rise in movement and adverse laboratory reports in August 2005. However even after the shutdown of the plant the movement continued the struggled for the rights of the affected population. In June 2010 the then chief minister announces the state cabinet's decision to setup a legal agency to assess compensation. The concerted efforts of the movement led to the closure of plant within five years. Moreover under popular pressure the state government was forced to pass a bill in the state legislative assembly in February 2011. However it did not became an act because the president of India returned the bill in February 2016.

4.4 C.K Janu and the land struggle

C.K Janu was a vibrant tribal leader from Wayanad district of Kerala. She was a semi-literate woman, belonging to an adiya (meaning slave) community, who started her formal education at the age of seventeen. Initially she joined communist party of India (Marxist) but later on parted away due to party's reluctance to raise the land question in Kerala. She formed Adivasi Vikasana Paravarthaka Samiti in 2001 for reclaiming the land of tribal people in the region.

Wayanad has highest population (37.36%) of Tribals in Kerala and majority (90%) of them is dependent on agriculture and allied purposes (Haseena, 2014). She understood, through her experiences, that in India the question of land and tribe is intertwined because forests as main source of livelihood for the tribals cannot exist without proper land. Therefore she put forth the fundamental question of land enshrined in Kerala land reform Act, 1965, which proved as a nightmare for the tribals, and waged a movement for Tribal's of Kerala. To intensify the agitation she moved to capital city Thiruvananthapuram and staged peaceful protest demonstration in front of the Secretariat (Devika, 2013). After forty eight day long agitation the tribal families were promised five acres of land. However the government retreated it promise. In 2003 the organization under the leadership of Janu attempted to built huts in Muthanga Wildlife sanctuary, which she claimed was originally the common land of tribal communities but this move was suppressed by the police action (p. 8). The struggle is still going on as the government has agreed over the demand but responded with inaction (Madhavan & Narayana, 2020, p. 17).

5. Conclusion

The way in which the idea and importance of 'Citizen Elite' have been discussed, implicitly lays emphasis on the shaping and framing of the discourse on democracy and civil society.

The role and importance can be acknowledged primarily on the basis of direction given by such elites to the environmental movements. Often this direction, by the elites, helps the movements to stay away from malicious practices of politics and appropriation by the vested interests. Such a direction was enriched by experience of conscious people across the world. For example Gandhi had read Ruskin, Tolstoy, Paine, Kropotkin etc. whereas Sunderlal Bahuguna read E.F Schumacher and J.C Kummappa. But it was only their vision to extrapolate and situate such ideas in local situations of India. This vision also democratizes the state and society on environmental problems. The issues raised during the movements are sensitively incorporated in the form of public policy. It is only their conviction to stand by all odds and save the essence of democracy.

Environmental movements in India, and elsewhere, cannot stay away from mainstream politics because of the involvement of larger questions of identity- like tribe, caste and region- into it. Although all the above mentioned elites had linkages with party politics in India, but by and large their association was ethically motivated by values of equality, democracy and love for environment. We may say that party politics was a medium to further their goals. Therefore the role of citizen elite in this context is to gain as well as differentiate themselves from the politics. Also it can be discerned, from the above four cases, that the affluent class background is not a necessary factor for organizing people, articulating demands and winning over the issues. Contrary to this, in the above cases it can be said that these individuals carry forward the movements' through continuous bargaining. The engagement of better situated individuals or groups in civil society is crucial for subordinate groups. The inspiration and shape given by these individuals is healthy for survival of democracy.

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