

A NEW ENVIRONMENTALISM FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM: STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY

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The world faces a number of complex and challenging environmental problems ranging from global warming to loss of biodiversity and India is no exception to this. In our large subcontinent with well over a billion people we face a range of environmental challenges from deforestation, land degradation, and biodiversity loss to air and water pollution and solid waste. There is much hand wringing about the terrible state of the environment accompanied by the usual refrain of government apathy, as well as calls for action. The irony of this is inescapable--on one hand while we blame the government for mismanaging the environment, on the other it is to the same state that we look for relief! It is imperative for us to break out of this "gloom and doom" mindset and of depending on the government to solve our problems. Sure enough, the country faces serious environmental problems. But at the same time, our awareness and understanding of these problems has increased. The experience of many countries rich and poor alike shows there are robust alternatives to government intervention in the field of environment. In this article I argue that institutions of civil society (community organizations, media, markets and such like) can and do play an important role in environmental management. It is these institutions that we must seek to strengthen and not the state. Our hope for salvation lies in a vibrant and active civil society and not in a moribund and corrupt state. A new environmentalism would include this and other features.

Take for instance "green" environmental problems, that is, those usually associated with renewable natural resources, or biomass materials such as deforestation, land degradation, biodiversity, and coastal and marine resources. Here there is a growing body of evidence that for centuries local communities have self-organized to manage natural resources such as village pastures and forests and irrigation networks. In fact, it is often the case that government agencies such as state forest departments can hinder local self-organizations. For instance, the Delhi-based environmental NGO, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has convincingly argued that rules imposed by governments without consulting local participants and excluding communities who have been using forest resources for generations, are bound to create conflict and are not conducive to sustainable use of these resources.

A detailed study at Cambridge University during the 1990s demonstrates the superiority of traditional, self-organized group-property systems of managing natural resources as compared to central government management. Reporting on this project in the prestigious magazine *Science* (21 August 1998) David Sneath used a satellite image of rolling grassland (used for raising livestock since ancient times) in Northern China, Mongolia and southern Siberia (Russia) to show great differences in grassland degradation—the Mongolian part of the satellite picture shows much less degradation since Mongolia allowed pastoralists to continue their traditional group-property institutions which involve seasonal migration of livestock. On the other hand, China and Russia imposed state-owned agricultural collectives involving permanent settlements resulting in extensive land degradation. Similar ill-advised government interventions have been

extensively documented by scholars such as Elinor Ostrom of Indiana University and many others.

This is not to argue that local self-organizations work well all the time and under all circumstances. Barren and littered parks in Delhi's residential colonies are good examples to the contrary. One has to identify the circumstances under which collective action will work. Much progress has been made on this front again thanks to the work of scholars such as Elinor Ostrom, Robert Wade, Jean-Marie Baland and Jean-Philippe Platteau and others. Simply put, one of the stylized fact that emerges is that benefits from putting in place governance systems for managing natural resources should exceed the costs of doing so.

In addition to local collective action, international experience also shows there are opportunities for successfully harnessing market forces to address environmental problems. Unlike the traditional approach, however, which views environmental problems as a moral issue (and companies as unethical generators of pollution), in the new environmentalism there is no room for such futile fingerpointing. As Paul Portney of Resources for the Future, a Washington-based environmental think tank points out, people do not think of themselves as immoral because they produce and have to eliminate bodily wastes. Rather, we recognise that this is inevitable in the process of converting food to energy. The same is true for an economic system where the environment acts both as a *source* of raw materials and as a *sink* for the residuals (by-products) of economic activity. Most citizens who live and work within an economic system would not find this immoral. Of course, just as society makes rules on how we deal with human wastes, it can also regulate the disposal of residuals caused by economic activity.

In this context, again it is crucial to limit the role of the state as a provider of environmental quality. Not only has it failed to do so adequately, but international experience convincingly shows that there are cheaper and more effective options available through harnessing market forces for many types of environmental problems, particularly those that relate to pollution. For example, taxing of pollution and polluting activities allows companies the flexibility to decide how and by how much to reduce pollution, and is more cost-effective in meeting environmental goals than through bureaucratic *fiat* (also known as command-and-control, or CAC). Objections that firms would pay the tax and continuing to pollute can be addressed by setting the tax rates high enough. In this context, it is important to realise that the goal is not to eliminate pollution but simply to reduce it to an acceptable level.

Pollution taxes and other economic instruments are not pie-in-the-sky ideas--examples of market-based instruments (MBIs) can now be found across the board from the rich countries of the West to developing countries such as China, Malaysia, Philippines, Colombia, and a host of others. India is conspicuous by its absence from the growing list of countries that are using MBIs for environmental management. The rhetoric of the Indian government in espousing MBIs at national and international fora such as the Rio Declaration, is only matched by the absence of concrete action.

Under the new environmentalism, the role of the state is merely that of a facilitator. It stops at creating the necessary conditions for civil society to flourish—for people to organize themselves and for markets to exist and function well, and removing environmentally harmful policies (such

as free irrigation water which causes overuse and salinity and waterlogging). As eminent journalist Sauvik Chakraverti argues the “hollowing out of the Indian state” is required since it has not only failed to deliver the goods, but has become a huge financial burden. It is time to abandon the traditional view of the environment as a morality-play with scheming capitalists and the state as saviour. Reality is far too complex for such generalisations and too much is at stake for such simplistic solutions.

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