

North–South Divide in Global Environmental Politics: Examining India’s Position

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Abstract:

In contemporary international politics, environmental conflict has emerged as a significant issue. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the international system witnessed a growing division of the world into two blocs over how to address environmental problems such as water scarcity, rising temperatures, and increasing levels of pollution. At one time, discussions in international relations primarily revolved around industrial advancement and the mutual relations among states that had progressed through industrialization and factory-based production. However, in the subsequent period, environmental concerns have emerged as a major issue in global politics. Within the international system, issues such as environmental degradation and ecological imbalance have often been brought to the forefront of global discussions when capitalist-dominated states deemed them significant. Yet today, countries like the United States have expressed reluctance even after signing the Paris Agreement. As a result, as environmental issues increasingly occupy a central place in world politics, a new form of division has become evident. The middle section of the report presents a detailed analysis of various environmentalists from the Indian perspective. It also highlights the significance of the report of the Brandt Commission in exploring the causes of the North–South divide. Finally, the report attempts to identify possible pathways toward consensus by resolving the debate between the Global North and the Global South.

Keywords: Environmental, Industrialization, Ecological, Global North, Global South

• Introduction

After the Second World War, a new dimension emerged in International political system. On the one hand, as a result of the Industrial Revolution and the advancement of science and technology, the countries of Western Europe and North America developed as capitalist industrialized nations. On the other hand, countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, having gained freedom from colonial rule, emerged as independent states. International scholars described these states as developing or “Third World” countries.¹ The newly independent countries realized that it would never be possible to achieve poverty eradication and national development within the existing international economic structure dominated by developed nations. Therefore, they took initiatives to establish a New International Economic Order

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(NEO) by demanding the restructuring of economic relations and cooperation between developed and developing countries.²

During this period, an Independent Commission on International Development was formed to determine the level of development of different countries of the world. The chairman of this commission was Willy Brandt. Based on the commission's report, the entire world was divided into two parts: the North and the South. The countries included in the Northern group were the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, France, and Germany, which were regarded as industrially developed states. The Southern group included countries such as Japan, Singapore, China, India, as well as countries of Africa and Latin America, which were mainly considered agrarian economies.³ However, this division was made primarily on the basis of economic differences.

The report also mentioned that the conditions imposed in the sphere of imports and exports were harmful to the countries of the South. These countries sought greater access to the domestic markets of developed nations. Secondly, there was a demand for increased capital investment rather than mere lending. This would help maintain a balance between the two groups through the transfer of advanced technology and a more equitable distribution of resources.⁴

- **Theoretical Perspectives on the Global North–Global South Debate**

The renowned environmental historian Ramachandra Guha, in his book 'Environmentalism: A Global History' (2000), has shown that there International Approaches to Environmental Conservation a fundamental or inherent difference of opinion between the two groups regarding environmental issues. However, both groups seek to protect the environment. The difference lies in how the environment should be conserved and who should participate in the conservation process. From a class-based perspective, he refers to the Global South as "Environmentalism of the Poor" (Livelihood Environmentalism). At the same time, he characterizes the environmentalism of the Global North as "Imperialism of the Affluent" (Full-Stomach Environmentalism)⁵.

The Global South includes countries such as Brazil, Nigeria, Thailand, and India. On the other hand, United States has played an important role in environmental discussions within the Global North. According to Guha, the primary source of environmental degradation is the excessive use of natural resources by the wealthy, who, due to their capacity, exploit them to a great extent. As a result, immense pressure is placed on natural resources, leading to environmental degradation. The poor suffer the most from this environmental decline.

Environmentalists in the Global North were involved in two types of movements—movements for environmental justice and movements for wildlife conservation. In the case of environmental justice movements, Rachel Carson's book 'Silent Spring' made an outstanding contribution. In this work, she first demonstrated how the use of DDT causes environmental pollution. On the other hand, wildlife conservation movements also played a significant role in shaping environmental laws in the United States.

If we examine environmental movements in the Global South, it becomes evident that the participation of the middle class in such movements was very limited. The poor people mainly participated in and led these movements. Examples include the Chipko Movement, the Narmada Bachao Movement, and the Silent Valley Movement. The primary reason behind these movements is that marginalized and oppressed sections of society depend on the environment for their livelihood. They obtain the basic necessities of life from nature, and therefore they constantly strive to protect forests and preserve rivers. Thus, the principal objective of environmental movements is not merely luxury but survival.

The second part of the discussion raises the question of why environmental issues have become such an important subject in international relations and how developed and developing countries perceive the environment. In the present context, as environmental issues increasingly occupy a central place in global politics, the world has become divided into two groups: on the one hand, socialist and capitalist industrially developed countries, and on the other, countries that began to pursue development after the end of colonial rule. Industrially and economically advanced countries are referred to as the Global North.

The main argument of these developed countries is that global food production and agricultural output will eventually cease to increase because population growth in underdeveloped countries is rapidly rising while the amount of cultivable land is decreasing. As a result, food shortages and famine may occur. In this context, Amartya Sen, in his book ‘Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation’, refers to the famines in China and India. He argues that India, being a democratic country, was able to overcome and control famine despite significant loss of life, whereas China failed to control famine effectively⁶. Ignoring these complexities, developed countries often blame underdeveloped nations for environmental problems. Despite extensive theoretical discussions by scholars of the Global South on this issue, industrialized countries have continued to dominate developing countries under the pretext of environmental protection.

- **International Approaches to Environmental Conservation**

In the early 1960s, due to the persistent efforts of environmental writers, researchers, and various NGOs, the United Nations began to take active steps. In 1968, under the initiative of UNESCO, the first Biosphere Conference on environmental issues was held in Paris. The objective of this conference was to establish coordination between the scientific use and conservation of natural resources within the biosphere. Representatives from more than 70 countries and various international organizations participated. This conference is regarded as laying the preliminary foundation of the concept of sustainable development. Based on its recommendations, UNESCO launched the “Man and the Biosphere” (MAB) Programme in 1971.⁷

However, the 1972 Stockholm Conference marked the first global-level discussion on environmental problems affecting humanity. At this conference, developing countries argued that before focusing on environmental protection, priority should be given to addressing economic inequality and poverty alleviation.⁸ On the other hand, developed nations blamed Third World countries for global environmental pollution, population explosion, and related

problems. Despite prolonged debates, a total of 26 principles were adopted. According to Principle 11 of the declaration, developed countries assured that they would provide financial assistance to ensure environmental protection in developing nations.

On the 20th anniversary of the Stockholm Conference, a global summit was held, known as the “Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit”. The main objective of this conference was to maintain a balance between environmental protection and economic development and to establish sustainable development as a global policy framework.⁹ However, the role of First World countries at this summit was highly controversial. They pledged leadership in environmental protection; on the other, controversies arose regarding their consumerist lifestyles and responsibility for industrialization. Although developed countries accepted the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) and promised to allocate 0.7 percent of their Gross National Product (GNP) to developing countries, they failed to fulfill this commitment in practice. Secondly, while they pledged to provide environmentally friendly modern technologies, these technologies proved too expensive for developing nations. Moreover, since “Agenda 21” was not legally binding, developed countries gradually retreated from their commitments.

In 2002, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, South Africa, the Johannesburg Declaration defined specific and distinct roles for developed and developing countries in achieving development goals. According to the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, developed countries were expected to change their patterns of production and consumption to adopt sustainable methods.¹⁰ Commitments were also made to eradicate poverty in developing countries and to ensure the proper production and use of chemicals by 2020. The declaration was equally significant for developing nations. Their primary responsibilities included combating corruption, protecting human rights, ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources and biodiversity, and addressing infectious diseases.

Finally, on 12 December 2015, under the initiative of the United Nations, a landmark conference on climate change was held in Paris, resulting in the Paris Agreement. The main objectives were to limit the global temperature increase to below 2 degrees Celsius, rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and ensure annual financial assistance of 100 billion US dollars to developing countries.¹¹ A total of 194 states, including the European Union, signed the agreement. It officially came into force on 4 November 2016. However, contrasting reactions were observed among developed countries. Evidence of this was seen when the United States withdrew from the agreement on 27 January 2026.

- **India’s Position**

A significant dimension of India’s environmental movement centre’s on the question of “environmental protection” and how, under capitalism, the architects of development processes and the rulers of the developed world seek to secure their hegemony through it. In countries like India and across the Third World, an allegation is often raised that for development-oriented states, “development” is so indispensable that environmental conservation appears to them as a mere luxury. Most Third World states have, in fact, followed the same path of

development as the developed countries. It is worth noting that such a narrative is frequently promoted to conceal the reality that the capitalist world has historically been a principal adversary of nature. At the same time, it is true that in countries like India, the concept and trajectory of development have largely been influenced and controlled by capitalist states. Consequently, India's environmental movements are often perceived by developed nations as expressions of "the environmentalism of the poor."

Proponents of this perspective have elaborated extensively on the issue. India's distinguished environmentalist Sunita Narain has argued that developed countries bear greater historical responsibility for climate change. Since the Industrial Revolution, they have contributed the largest share of carbon emissions. Therefore, they must assume greater responsibility in addressing the climate crisis. This principle is known as "Historical Responsibility." In her book "Global Warming in an Unequal World: A Case of Environmental Colonialism", she demonstrates that global warming is fundamentally an unequal problem—those who have contributed more to it must shoulder a proportionately greater share of the burden. To ensure climate justice, developed countries must therefore take stronger initiatives and provide greater support.¹² Narain further observes that although developed nations emitted the bulk of greenhouse gases during their industrialization, the pressure to reduce future emissions now falls disproportionately on developing countries. She characterizes this dynamic as "environmental colonialism." In her view, developing countries should retain the right to pursue development as an entitlement, while developed nations must accept greater responsibility for mitigation and support.¹³

In this context, Jairam Ramesh, in his book "Green Signals: Ecology, Growth and Democracy in India", analyses the relationship among environment, economic growth, and democracy in India. He offers a new perspective on the "Growth vs. Environment" debate. According to him, development and environmental protection are not inherently contradictory; rather, environmental concerns must be placed at the center of economic growth. The old binary of "Growth versus Environment" is outdated. Instead, environmental considerations must be integrated into the growth process.¹⁴

Ramesh argues that in a country like India, rapid economic growth must go hand in hand with environmental security and social welfare. Development that destroys the environment cannot be sustainable in the long run. Environmental laws and policies, he insists, must not remain merely on paper; they must be implemented effectively. Rather than merely increasing project "clearances," the proper enforcement of existing environmental laws is far more crucial. He cautions that following the path taken by developed countries—pursuing rapid, production-driven growth first and addressing environmental damage later—would not be effective in the Indian context. Such a model, he suggests, does not represent a sound or sustainable direction for economic development.

- **Resolution of the Debate: Pathways to Consensus**

After the Cold War, the North–South divide that emerged in global politics gradually became even more pronounced in the sphere of environmental issues. The principal areas of debate between the North and the South revolve around responsibility and equity, climate finance, and

technology transfer. The imbalance of power between the two blocs is most clearly reflected in negotiations over climate finance. Northern countries have pledged billions of dollars to assist developing nations in coping with the impacts of climate change; however, in practice, these promises are often not fully honored. Moreover, financial assistance from developed countries frequently comes with stringent conditions, compelling Third World nations to implement specific policies, thereby challenging their ability to safeguard their own national interests.

Therefore, in order to bridge the North–South divide, the principle of “Common but Differentiated Responsibilities” (CBDR), adopted in international environmental agreements, must be implemented in a more rigorous and effective manner. At the same time, countries of the South must progressively strengthen their scientific and technical capacities. Building local expertise, promoting indigenous and traditional knowledge systems, and encouraging South–South cooperation are crucial strategies for addressing the North–South divide. For instance, developing countries should enhance mutual cooperation in areas such as biodiversity conservation, climate change adaptation, and sustainable agriculture.

To strengthen the voice of the Global South in environmental governance, a fundamental shift in perspective is required in the formulation of global environmental policies. This includes ensuring proper representation of developing countries in international negotiations, granting them equal participation in setting the global environmental agenda, and providing the necessary financial resources, technology, and scientific expertise to address their distinct environmental challenges. It is not sufficient for Northern countries alone to determine the terms of global environmental agreements. Rather, the international community must recognize the diverse needs and priorities of different regions and seek solutions that are globally sustainable while remaining compatible with local realities.

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