

Development Practitioners have to be Responsible Environmentalists

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By V Santhakumar

1. Introduction

Many development practitioners in India are interested in protecting (specific aspects of) the natural environment. An attitude to protect the environment is deeply personal. We can see many people willing to sacrifice their incomes and careers; curtail or stop the consumption of certain items and substances as part of their contribution to environmental protection. These are important and necessary traits of environmentalism. However, I would argue that there is a need for a rational approach to environmental protection. This is important for two reasons: First, to ensure that their call or actions to protect the environment do not impose a substantial cost on the poor or the underdeveloped sections of the society. (We presume that genuine environmental activists are interested not only in the natural environment but also in protecting the interests of the vulnerable sections of society.) Secondly, in order to enhance the effectiveness of actions and the realization of goals, a strategy informed by rational thinking that does not neglect certain basic insights and indications in our emotional over-enthusiasm for protecting the natural environment, is needed.

2. Poor people have a lower ability to protect the environment

People may be interested in saving the environment but are they willing to make sacrifices for it? One way to assess this is to find out whether people are willing to pay for an action to protect the natural environment. In general, evidence indicates that this willingness is influenced by their incomes and poor people may be less willing to protect the environment.

One may argue that this lower willingness to pay is due to the lack of awareness or education. It is true that many may not be aware of the importance of protecting the environment and there is a need for enhancing this awareness among them. However, even if we take care of this awareness creation, the issue of the lower willingness to pay persists.

Why are they reluctant to pay or make sacrifices for protecting the environment? This is not difficult to understand. Consider a family living in a shanty without a hygienic toilet, and using biomass for cooking (which fills the house with smoke), in a crowded locality (probably, an urban slum). Their micro-environment (house and surroundings) is highly polluted with smoke, dust, poor drainage, and so on. For them, the possible pollution of the macro-environment, say, dust or vehicular pollution in the city, carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, water pollution of the nearby river may not be additionally uncomfortable or of great concern. Hence, there are real reasons for them to take a lax view of the environment.

Another reason is that given their very limited incomes, and their need to spend money on a number of basic goods (like food, clothes, health-care, education, sometimes drinking water, electricity), they may not have enough resources to spend on many other items. This may reflect in their lower demand for public goods, such as a clean environment, in

general.

3. The Need to address economic underdevelopment

Let us consider the case of Bangalore. A significant section of the people living in the city belong to the middle- and upper middle-classes; there are a few billionaires and a number of millionaires too. The growth of Information Technology (IT) and IT-enabled service has created a pool of affluent people in the city. A majority of them is concerned about protecting the environment. They would be happy to see less dust and vehicular pollution in the atmosphere. They may be interested in reducing their carbon footprints to decelerate climate change. They would like more parks and protection of the natural lakes within the city. They may be willing to take some action to protect forests and wildlife in the interior parts of Karnataka. There are a number of such efforts already being carried out by these people.

However, it is not easy to improve the environment of Bangalore. It is not solely due to the apathetic attitude or the corrupt behaviour of a few (such as bureaucrats and politicians). There are other fundamental reasons. A large section of the urban population consists of migrant labourers and manual workers who have migrated from other parts of the country in search of better livelihood opportunities. Job opportunities for them in a city with a burgeoning middle-class are aplenty. The middle-class also benefits from such migration because they get house-help and labour at relatively cheaper rates. There is a need for collective, coordinated action for maintaining a clean environment (which is a public good), but it is difficult for people who are disparate in terms of income/wealth to come together for it, especially when the poor are likely to have a lower demand for it (or cannot afford it).

Another reason is that, though a significant section of the voters in Bangalore are from the middle class, poverty and

underdevelopment are serious issues in other parts of Karnataka. The middle-class in Bangalore may like to have more flyovers, suburban trains, wider roads, sewerage systems, and so on but more money allocated to Bangalore would mean a reduction of resources for the other underdeveloped regions. Political parties that need to safeguard their own political interests are forced to spend resources towards all regions of the state. Therefore, it is not surprising that Bangalore, despite the fact that it generates a substantial amount of resources for the state government, does not receive its fair share of public resources even though it is facing problems of congestion and overcrowding.

Corruption and lax attitude of government officials create environmental problems in the city. Licences are given to real estate developers allowing them to cut down trees and flout regulations on waste control or drainage. People may dump waste in, or allow untreated sewerage to flow into lakes. Corruption could be the major reason behind these illegal actions leading to environmental pollution and damage. However, this corruption or ill-governance is also not unrelated to the issues of underdevelopment that we have discussed earlier. There are indications that if the majority population in a state continues in poverty, vulnerability and underdevelopment, and only a small section belongs to the middle-class, political establishment and government officials have less incentive to improve governance and reduce corruption (Santhakumar, 2014). Hence, the continuance of corruption and ill-governance in a state like Karnataka, which is harmful for its environmental protection, could be rooted in its economic underdevelopment.

Economic and human development are important for environmental protection for another reason. Though most countries in the world have instituted laws for protecting the environment, the actual enforcement of these laws varies in different countries. In general, there is a lax enforcement of

environmental laws in the poorer and the developing countries. In most countries, a major part of the enforcement is due to the pressure from the people. There are, what can be called, the citizens' actions to protect the environment and these may include public interest litigations and/or direct actions – like organizing a strike in front of a polluting factory. The impact of these actions depends on how far such actions of a section of people can attract and mobilize public opinion in favour of protecting the environment and pressurizing the government and regulatory bodies to act. This is more likely to happen in societies where the majority are not poor and are interested in protecting the environment, and it may depend on the level of human development there. This is visible in India too. Environmental action is likely to be much more successful in states like Kerala and Goa which are also at the top (among Indian states) in terms of human development indicators.

The important lesson is that a cleaner natural environment cannot be created or sustained (in the current context¹) when a major section of the society is poor and underdeveloped. This is true not only for urban spaces that we have discussed in the previous paragraphs. If millions of people living in the catchment area of the river Ganga are poor and underdeveloped, and they practice open defecation, it will have an impact on the pollution levels of this river, and the difficulty in cleaning it. It is true even for forests in rural areas. We may note that the area under forest cover has increased in the developed world during the last 100 years (even during periods when there was not enough concern for the environment) primarily because of the movement of people out of agriculture and to cities. Previously cultivated areas, left uncultivated for a fairly long time have fostered the growth of natural plants (and animals). Environmental activism needs to note this positive role of development. If it is not recognised, it may become not only elitist but also ineffective in many contexts. Hence, those who are interested in effective environmental activism should think about addressing under-

development. Some of the possible ways of combining environmental concern and human development are discussed in the last section.

4. Environmental protection is costly

Though it should be common knowledge, well-meaning environmental activists often neglect the social costs of environmental protection and its distribution. No action, including the protection of forests, is costless. There are direct and indirect costs. The money spent on direct action – seeing that the forest is protected from possible encroachers – is one part of the cost. There are (indirect) costs for those whose activities have to be curtailed due to the actions or policies aimed at protecting forests. The tribal population and others who use forests to collect fuel-wood or other items for their survival would need to be restrained and it may reduce their welfare. That is also part of the cost of environmental protection. The need to reduce the economic activities which emit carbon dioxide add, to the indirect cost of the action. In general, there are substantial costs for all types of environmental protection whether it is for protecting forests, for cleaning water bodies or reducing the emission of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. When we accept that there are costs for environmental protection, it brings up a number of other issues. First, a higher level of protection would mean a much higher level of cost under normal circumstances. For example, one can have a reasonable state of forests even by allowing some people (say, the tribal population) to collect a few items from it (which would reduce their costs). However, if we want to have a forest which is to be completely free from human movements, even this minimal use cannot be allowed. Also, more money will have to be spent on patrolling and preventing entry of people into the forests.

Another implication of the cost of environmental protection is that we may not preserve each and every feature of the natural environment in its pristine form. The cost of this would be

huge and no society is in a position to afford it. Hence, there should be a selection of what may be protected and up to which level. Here, we imply that certain actions of protecting the environment could be more beneficial than others. In selecting these, we may have to use the notion of the benefits of environmental protection, which takes us to the issue of trade-offs in environmental protection.

5. The trade-offs of environmental protection

The trade-offs in environmental protection manifest in different ways. First, it may not be desirable to avoid pollution/damage completely in the case of the environment. Ensuring that there is absolutely no dust particle in the atmosphere could be unimaginably costly. And at the same time, the benefit of doing so may not be great. Most human beings and other forms of life can tolerate some level of dust particles, and hence, the benefits associated with completely avoiding these may not be high. This is the principle behind permissible levels. Here, we accept the fact that some level of pollution is acceptable.

We may not protect all features of the environment in a way that we leave them intact. Though the beaches and coastlines (probably, mangroves) are important environmentally and need to be protected, at least, some stretches have to be 'used' for, say, fishing, or the construction of harbours, and so on. This may require a greater protection of certain stretches and the willingness to use some others for economic activities.

Such a trade-off is not static and may change with the evolving socio-economic conditions and the availability of better technology. The development of communication systems may reduce the cost of information collection and dissemination which were previously needed for the enforcement of environmental regulations. When people have higher incomes and they start valuing visits to national parks, the society's willingness and ability to protect forests may go up. The

development of renewable energy technologies (or the reduction of its cost) may enable societies to reduce the dependence on fossil fuels for energy production which may reduce the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Hence, there is a need to consider and assess the benefits of actions involved in protecting the environment. Can we truly measure the benefits of protecting the environment? By focusing on the measurable benefits², do we miss the crucial aspects? These are debatable topics. Much has already been written on how to measure different kinds of environmental values, and I am leaving that out of this essay³.

However, environmental activism and decision-making rarely take place on the basis of widely agreed assessments of the benefits of any action. Those who are in favour of an action may come out with estimates of benefits, which may be contested by the opponents of the action (especially in the developing societies.) Hence, benefits are not assessed and even if it is done, these rarely influence decisions.

6. Norms and the environment

We can see that some people are more concerned about the environment than others. One explanation could be that they have a higher level of awareness about it. These people also tend to consider it a desirable norm and believe that everybody should have a similar attitude towards the environment. Though this, by itself, is not harmful, neglecting others' (material) circumstances that make them take a different view on specific environmental issues may be harmful. For example, those who have settled in forested areas several decades ago and continue to survive on cultivation there, may have a different view on the appropriate policies to protect forests from that of the urban residents who have moved out of agriculture. There are many people who depend directly on water bodies, mangroves, backwaters and marshy

lands, and these people may not see merit in a complete ban on their activities based on an environmental concern (which does not take into account their concerns). A number of environmental activists in India come from the upper caste groups and they (or their older generations) could live with self-esteem even without a higher level of material consumption (due to the hierarchical nature of the society), and it may be relatively easy for them to advocate moderate consumption (or adoption of certain habits, like vegetarianism) for protecting the environment. These may not be easy for or obvious to people belonging to other social groups and identities.

It is easy to understand this tussle between those who don't eat meat in India and others who have been consuming different forms of meat, including beef, as part of their life and subsistence. One cannot have a common approach to the protection of wildlife (animals) based on vegetarianism (or religious aversion to eating beef) even within India. This was an insurmountable problem between Indian and Chinese authorities regarding the protection of tigers. Many Chinese people believe that the body parts of dead tigers can be used for their traditional medicine as long as this does not affect the protection of wild tigers whereas, such a use is morally reprehensible for a number of Indian environmentalists. Hence, it is better for a responsible environmentalist to have an open view that others may have genuine reasons for holding a belief that is different from his or her own. This may enable them to have a more nuanced understanding and think about appropriate strategies to persuade the majority to follow an environment-friendly behaviour.

7. Political economy and the environment

Political economy is a domain in which the interests of different groups of people are articulated and contested and these are resolved in a manner reflecting the distribution of power within the society. It may sometimes lead to decisions

that may affect the less powerful (the poor and vulnerable) sections of the society. Such undesirable outcomes are not uncommon with regard to environmental management.

Most efforts to protect forests in India (though these are laudable) are achieved by denying the rights of the tribal population which have been depending on forests historically. These people are economically vulnerable as most of them have not gained the capacity to pursue alternative occupations. A higher level of protection of forests would mean a much higher level of restriction on the economic activities of these people. We have not been very successful in compensating their losses, or ensuring that these people have viable alternative occupations. This is primarily because of the limited power that the tribal population enjoy in the Indian democracy.

There could be other cases where the political economy determines the outcomes in environmental conflicts. Though the Indian legal system is capable of taking actions against a few large industrial polluters, our preparedness to control pollution from a large number of small polluters (households, people using old, smoke-emitting vehicles) is not very effective. Political decision-making becomes tedious with regard to the large number of small polluters, even as, in aggregate terms, the damage that they inflict on the environment could be higher than that by a few big (industrial) polluters. One can see the role of political economy in how relatively easy it is to control vehicular air pollution in Delhi (through the use of CNG or other means) compared to cities like Mumbai. Though the issue of pollution in Mumbai could be as bad as in Delhi, the decision-making and implementation are relatively easier in the latter, where much of the power rests with the central government, judiciary and the middle-class, whereas, it is much more complex in Mumbai with the location of industries, concentration of workers, poverty and underdevelopment not only in Mumbai but also in the whole of Maharashtra which elects the state government,

the decision-making body.

What should be the lessons from the role of political economy in environmental protection? One should be concerned about the fact that there could be certain sections who bear (unequally) the cost of environmental protection and their losses can be substantial. Hence, there is a need to consider their losses and the possibilities of compensation. Moreover, an understanding of the political economy would also inform the possible challenges in implementing environment-friendly decisions even if they seem scientifically rational. This may help in designing appropriate strategies to build necessary coalitions to reach favourable outcomes.

8. An anthropocentric view of the environment?

While assessing the trade-offs associated with protecting the environment, we are considering the gain/loss of happiness (or utility) to the human beings. This is indeed an anthropocentric view. Hence, when a tree is damaged or a species is protected, the gains to human beings (and not to the tree or the birds and animals using the tree or to the species which survives) are taken into account. One can view this as a limitation of the approach. However, we may also note that 'intentional' protection of environmental and natural resources (including animals) is a human project. It is not known whether species other than human beings make an effort to protect other species. There is no serious problem if the considerations of human beings determine the priority of environmental conservation since it is they who are interested in and have to bear the costs of such conservation. However, this could be a narrower perspective if human beings consider only the benefits that they get directly from conserving the environment and natural resources. In fact, that is not the case.

9. A moral position on environment need not always be insightful

It is true that certain people could be emotionally and morally tuned in to the idea of protecting the environment. Such a perspective is useful and necessary to some extent. There could be people who may be focusing exclusively on material consumption for their happiness leading to a higher cost on the environment. Encouraging such people to change their behaviour may require moral and emotional arguments.

However, such moral and emotional disposition should not prevent us from taking a rational view when necessary. For example, forests have to be protected for their contribution to ecology. The ecological health of forests depends on a balance in the diversity of the population of different species. A rapid increase in the growth of the population of any one species (say elephants or deer or tigers) will work against the ecological balance. For example, if the deer population increases in the European temperate forests, it may negatively affect the growth of plants there as deer eat young shoots of the plants. Or, an extraordinary increase in the number of tigers may lead to the reduction in the number of many other animal species. Hence, keeping a balance in the population of species and sub-species is necessary. This may even require reducing the number of those species whose numbers increase beyond a limit. Many developed countries use 'controlled hunting' as a way to achieve this objective. Such hunting (usually carried out by people who are willing to pay a substantial fee) generates a significant amount of resources for protecting forests in many parts of the world. However, a moral view of protecting the wildlife or forests may not enable such a strategy despite its importance in ensuring the health of the ecosystem.

10. Desirable actions for protecting the

environment

Given the discussions in this chapter, one can identify certain broad strategies of responsible environmental activism in developing societies such as India. We have already mentioned one strategy, i.e., not to neglect the importance of, at least, the minimal levels of human development in encouraging people to be concerned about or to take actions for environmental protection. There could be a number of ways by which this concern for development and environmental activism can be combined.

It is easier if the damage to the environment is mainly due to the lack of awareness or attitudinal problems. There are a number of such cases. Open defecation is a big problem in the underdeveloped parts of India. This practice leads to the increased prevalence of water-borne diseases, infections of worms in children, affecting their nutritional intake, which could be deleterious for their cognitive development and educational achievement. In addition, this practice pollutes water bodies and rivers and leads to other kinds of related environmental problems. Avoiding such a practice is not very costly since well-functioning toilets are available cheap. It is noted that many people practice open defecation not due to their lower incomes or the inability to construct cheap toilets or due to the absence of governmental schemes or investments for this purpose but because they do not believe that it is a harmful practice. Hence, this is mainly an issue of awareness and attitude. There could be similar other issues. We can see middle-class households refusing to take minimal efforts to segregate waste (into dry/wet or biodegradable/non-biodegradable) or to pay a small amount of money for solid-waste management. While considering their expenditures on many other items, one can see that their unwillingness to pay (make an effort) is an issue of attitude and awareness. Creating awareness and changing attitudes matter in these cases, and the changes in practices that

environmentalists seek are not very costly for the society. Hence, these should be pursued. (It is not implied here that changing attitudes is easy⁴.)

There are cases where the losers (especially those who are also poor, vulnerable and underdeveloped) can be compensated, and despite paying such compensation, certain environmental actions can be beneficial as in the case of protecting a high value (in terms of its ecological importance) forest. The people who depend on it for fuelwood, or for the collection of products for their subsistence, can be compensated or helped to find other forms of livelihoods. In many cases, there can be innovative strategies through which the livelihood of these people can be integrated with the conservation efforts. The preservation of wildlife parks in parts of Africa (carried out with the involvement and help of international organizations) integrates local people into the conservation programs. Conservation itself can be a sustainable business given the willingness of people (mainly from the developed countries) who are interested in visiting wildlife parks, coral reefs, protected beaches, mangroves and so on. A part of the revenues from such sources can be used for meeting the cost of conservation and enabling the livelihoods of the local people. With the advent of new technology and business models (including e-commerce), people who depend on natural resources (in a harmful manner) can be persuaded to change their livelihoods by compensating them or providing them alternative livelihoods which do not reduce their incomes. The growing market for natural products could be an opportunity in this regard. However, even when better technology is available, people may continue with older practices. Responsible environmentalism has a significant role in enabling the shift from such practices.

Technology and innovations can be used to make the shift towards environment- friendly behaviour, less costly. Responsible environmentalists can play an important role in

this since such technology and innovation are not available to many people in many parts of the world. Awareness creation, subsidy, and demonstration projects may be needed for spreading the awareness about these innovations. There are innumerable cases in renewable energy, waste management, urban governance, etc., wherein new technologies can be used to bring in practices which are less harmful to the environment, and at the same time enable people to continue with their lives without sacrificing their comforts. The use of information technology may open up new opportunities. E-commerce ventures such as UBER can be used to reduce the dependence on private transport, increase capacity utilization of cars (and thereby reduce the number of cars needed) and enable car-pooling by passengers (with a reduction in the use of fossil fuels and generation of carbon dioxide). Enterprises such as AIRBNB leading to the capacity utilization of the existing residences may reduce the need for constructing newer ones. All these provide opportunities for combining economic development and environmental conservation.

Responsible environmentalists may also facilitate collective action for the provision of public goods such as a clean environment (and other related services such as solid waste management, noise reduction, public transport, reduced corruption and so on). Even when people have higher incomes and demand (or are willing to pay for such) services and coordinating mechanisms are needed to facilitate collective action. Information dissemination plays an important role here. Providing information on the commissions and omissions of stakeholders (including government officials and politicians) and also citizens could be one way of encouraging people to act (who may be lax in the absence of such public information). Information on the status of the environment (including pollution levels and their harmful effects) may encourage citizens' actions and appropriate responses on the part of the regulatory authorities. All these are appropriate areas of action for responsible environmentalists.

Though the middle-class and the affluent in many parts of the world can afford to adopt environment-friendly practices in different aspects of their life, such a transformation is rather slow in developing societies. Many of these continue with resource-rich lifestyles or those which lead to the use of resources in an environmentally harmful manner. In reality, they can afford to change their lifestyles. Part of the problem could be the lack of awareness that we have mentioned earlier. However, there could be other reasons as well. A greater part of their consumption is for status-related purposes. People may opt for bigger houses or bigger cars (or such amenities which are resource-intensive) in keeping with their status in society and not necessarily because of their need for a more comfortable residence or mobility. It has been noted that people who come out of poverty and other difficult situations, may adopt resource-rich practices that may be harmful to the environment.

There can be conscious efforts to bring in attitudinal changes to this class of society. It could be by demonstrating to them that one need not sacrifice comforts (say, in terms of residence or mobility) by adopting a resource-saving lifestyle. Moreover, there could be efforts to demonstrate the futility of status-based consumption (no amount of consumption for this purpose would lead to increased happiness due to the possibility of the changing benchmarks in society) and its social costs. This is yet another space for action by responsible environmentalists.

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