CHAPTER 7

New Politics, Old Paradigms: Urban Environmentalism and the Reshaping of New Delhi

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Abstract

Taking two media-led environmental campaigns in India’s capital, New Delhi, as case studies, this paper argues that climate change discourse has followed the patterns of development politics. While globalisation and economic shifts have altered the North/South power dynamics since the twentieth century, the post-development age has given rise to a transnational middle class that seeks to reemploy similar hegemonic paradigms and shape the world on its terms. This class has replaced the notional North; the world’s poor replaces the notional South. This transnational middle class, the case studies highlights, moulds the environmental discourse in the public sphere to suit their own imaginations of urban space and the mainstream media are active partners in this articulation.

1 Introduction

Within ten years of the Brundtland report,1 concerns around the environment, which had lurked for decades in the fringes of political discourse, entered the mainstream. Today, in both the global North and South, environmental rhetoric is built into political campaigns. It competes for attention with every other governmental concern, internationally and within nation states: issues of economic growth, development, poverty alleviation or even defence strategies. As the Tories in the UK are compelled to promise the “greenest government ever”,2 and Obama marked his 2008 victory speech as “the moment when the rise of

1 Known also as ‘Our Common Future’, the 1987 Brundtland Report published the findings of the Brundtland commission, an organisation commissioned by the UN secretary general in 1983 to raise awareness of the need for sustainable development and encourage nations to pursue united sustainable policies.
2 David Cameron’s speech to civil servants at the Department of Energy and Climate Change, May 14, 2010.
the oceans began to slow”\textsuperscript{3} so in India, in battles between indigenous land owners in mineral-rich areas of Orissa and corporate entities like Vedanta, the courts are forced to legislate against indiscriminate mining. Brazil, like several other countries of Africa, uses land resources as a bargaining tool in international diplomacy, making Northern countries compensate her for not denuding the rainforest cover. Environment has replaced development as the overarching paradigm of 21st century politics.

This essay, however, seeks to culturally situate present-day environmental discourse and show it as a continuation of the development politics that emerged in the middle of the last century. It argues that despite a shifting of the goalposts – climate change instead of hunger or forest degradation instead of abject poverty – the rules essentially remain the same: the powerful decide, the marginalised negotiate, albeit with some crucial differences.

Towards the end of the last century, development policies, with their focus on comparative equity and the forces of globalisation gave rise to a new “transnational class of winners”,\textsuperscript{4} educated cosmopolitan people who share the same aspirations whether they live in New York or New Delhi. According to Sachs, their proportion today is roughly equal in both the global South and North.\textsuperscript{5} With increased acceleration, this essay claims, these global citizens have started to impose their imagination on their habitation, especially cities, ignoring other claimants, their desires and needs. By moulding discourses in the public sphere through the use of media, especially mainstream media, this new class has managed to pursue its own agenda, presenting it as ‘common sense’, similar to the economic model of development which too has been perceived as the only possible alternative.\textsuperscript{6}

Writing on New Delhi, where the two case studies are based, sociologist Amita Baviskar states:

\textsuperscript{3} Barack Obama’s election victory speech, November 4, 2008, Grant Park, Chicago, Illinois.


\textsuperscript{5} Sachs, “Preface to the New Edition.”