



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Protecting the Environment while Maintaining the Economic Growth: India's Environment Diplomacy during the UPA Rule (2004-2014)

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Abstract:

The Climate diplomacy is an important arena where strength of India was felt and the policy steps taken by India ensured that its image becomes strong and its voice is heard. Using environment diplomacy to find a win-win solution to the problem of climate change whereby the challenges of climate crisis can be met even while maintaining India's growth momentum has been an important component of the diplomacy of the UPA Government of India.

Among the various initiatives taken during 2004-14, India held a major role at global, regional and bilateral diplomatic negotiations, which also established India's position for strong environment policies. This hypothesis can be verified by the efforts taken by India at the Cancun Summit in 2010, SAARC summit on Climate Change in Thimphu in 2010 and negotiations with Bangladesh on Sunderbans delta during the period. From 2010, SAARC nations also ensured to have a combined statement at UNFCCC, which helped in enhancing regional diplomatic structure and India's opinion in multilateral forums.

The initiatives taken during the period were so strong and necessary that they are still the bedrock for the policies of the present government. For example, the Paris(2015) commitments and the linked nationally determined contributions follow the templates of the commitments that were negotiated earlier. The regional forum also evolved during the period and the focus shifted to the necessities of the vulnerable

SAARC countries as they could voice out their strong voices together since 2010. Adaptation became the most important issue in the discussion which was later culminated into commitment goals. A grouping helped South Asia to collectively bargain for more favourable deals. This diplomatic smoothness had not been garnered without strong measures at domestic policymaking like setting up of National Green Tribunal, formulation of India Climate Assessment Report, Indo-Bangladesh Sundarbans Eco-System Forum and National Action Plan on Climate Change. The national measures combined with bilateral, regional and global level environmental diplomacy by the UPA Government enabled India to persuade its interlocutors to appreciate India's need for maintaining a robust economic growth to alleviate poverty even while putting into place measures to address the challenges of climate change.

Introduction:

Politics play a role in every aspect of our lives, and with rising impact of Climate Change, now environment impacts politics. The Green Political theory explains how political decisions are manifested by the concern for nature. It deals with relating issues of human and non-human collaborations with contemporary issues of climate change, oil crisis etc. As John Barry explains, "green political theory is the most recent of schools of political thinking, where social and environmental relations are not only important in human society but also constitutive of human society."(Barry 2014, 154)

The government of India under the United Progressive Alliance took numerous measures to link these aspects of politics sustainably. Where countries are trying to be in the race of economic development and India is one of the largest economies in the world, the challenge of ensuring that the environment is not degraded in the achievement for growth is mandatory.

There is a constant debate among the environmentalists and policymakers on saving the environment while not reducing the rate of economic growth. This has been seen in the debate to reduce use of fossil fuels and to focus on non-conventional sources of energy like solar, tidal, etc. This seems like an easy solution to escape to the sustainable pathway without addressing the present unsustainable conditions.

India has always been in the global limelight, as it is the fastest growing major economy which has emitted only 3 percent of energy-related carbon dioxide since 1890, India has a relatively clean past but also an increasing responsibility for the future of the earth. (Chaulia 2015)

In this mix of finding what kind of solutions a state should approach and the historical responsibilities of the developed world, steps of India are counted. The government during UPA had been active in analysing the green pathway. But before assessing the policies of the former government, one needs to address the debate.

The environment and development debate:

For any kind of development, assets are required. These resources are gathered from what nature can offer, and unfortunately, they are limited. This wealth is what we inherit from the past generations and are our responsibility for the future. But while exploiting the natural capital, we often forget that they aren't our property, they are our liability to the future. We have not innovated any new natural capital, this has existed beyond our awareness and permissions. (Schumacher 1973)

This understanding is the crux of the debate, but with this knowledge still what we lack is the sense, which leads to overexploitation. An awareness of not doing damage, by causing minimum harm to the environment is the most acceptable pathway.

In order to achieve growth and development, resources are used, what is upto us is to use them judiciously and in a manner that may not cause any permanent damage to the environment. The most prominent indicators of measure that has been cultivated to garner this growth is the economic prowess achieved by state. There has been a consistent debate between protecting environments while maintaining a decent pace of economic growth.

To achieve the desired rates of development while not polluting the environment beyond certain limits, the respective governments come up with policies, which keep the environment in the centre. It is a harsh reality that nature will be exploited in some or the other manner, a regulated measure will keep a tab on unmindful exploitation. The prominent way of finding solutions to this juggle for resources comes from the approach to look for sustainable solutions, while less focus is on unsustainable practices, and ways to curb them.

The policies manifested by UPA government focused on both the aspects, for example, NGT was established in 2010 to curtail the unsustainable practices, and the 'New Environment Policy' of 2006 was created to find solutions to sustainable practices.

Before focusing on how the UPA government was able to maintain an adequate domestic growth rate, we shall address the measures taken by India during the environment debates and negotiations across the world.

India and negotiations: UPA's environment diplomacy

India's tryst with environmental diplomacy was initiated when in 1972, Indira Gandhi mentioned that need and poverty are the biggest polluters. While later Maurice Strong, UN Secretary General in 1972 mentioned in his memoirs, poverty is the greatest polluter of all. (Ramesh 2017) After forty years, in 2012, India hosted 11th COP of Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) and marked the twentieth anniversary of Rio. In this duration, various international initiatives and progress to achieve climate preparedness took place in the form of commitments in Kyoto protocol to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, which analysed the levels of impact on the society by the menace of climate change.

By the time UPA came in power in 2004, environment had become a major issue in public debates and policies were created to preserve it. The domestic initiatives will be dealt with in the next section, here are the important steps taken by the government at the international front.

Not any specific year can be labeled as the year when the initiatives for the environment were brought to the forefront completely, the momentum to bring these viewpoints at the forum came with building up of knowledge and negotiations over the time. Here the author mentions a few events, as they were remarkable initiatives in the scheme for collaboration of states.

Like Cancun summit of 2010, where the South Asian came up as a grouping was under the leadership of Jairam Ramesh, a very vocal and arduous environment minister of that time. In his book, 'Green Signals: Ecology, Growth, and Democracy in India' published in 2015, he mentioned that he was asked by the Prime Minister to be a part of the solution. However, it is very difficult of South Asia to represent itself as a group actively and prominently in the world politics, they were able to keep their voices together at the UNFCCC platform. Since India is the biggest and powerful state of the region, the achievement of the combined grouping could be addressed to its government to a certain extent.

Another important SAARC summit was held in Thimphu in 2010. This year special focus of the summit was on Climate Change. When South Asia championed at the UNFCCC forum in Cancun, they made a big move at the regional committal level. The result of the numerous efforts cannot be limited to the final outcomes or results, the long forgone stalled process has moved outside the limited scope of things. This should be seen as an achievement, especially when the states are non-committal.

When the regional forum succeeds, the bilateral are already the ones with a loud voice of appreciation for them. Environment diplomacy was seen in the crude form, as India's then Minister for Environment and Forests, Jairam Ramesh initiated the efforts for the protection of the Sundarbans from environmental degradation. The Memorandum of Understanding between India and Bangladesh was signed in 2011, which facilitated efforts for cooperation in the areas of conservation of biodiversity, joint management of resources, livelihood generation for poverty alleviation and development, cataloging of local flora and fauna and studying the impacts of climate change.

The Memorandum of Understanding was signed for cooperation in the field of renewable energy. Under the MoU, the Protocol on Conservation of the Royal Bengal Tiger of the Sunderbans was also signed. Such agreements are pivotal for diplomacy as they show the path for cooperation, like, movement of tiger cannot be limited to a territory, and such openness of nation-state boundaries may eventually open doorways for humanity. This may seem a far-fetched thought as not much progress has been made in achieving these objectives till now. Ortolano et al. (2016) on their work collaboration of India and Bangladesh mentions,

However, formal procedures under the MoU and Protocol are still being established and progress in implementing joint projects has been slow. Nonetheless, some progress has been made (e.g., a jointly produced study on Sundarbans' biodiversity) and more is expected as some of the more contentious issues between the two countries are resolved by negotiations.

Although, more could be achieved, but the appreciation of negotiation has to be seen beyond the bilateral progress made. The building of camaraderie is essential. Such efforts were also seen in the bilateral relations with other states sharing the Himalayan border with India.

The then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in his speech at the launch of National Mission of Himalaya said,

While a large part of the Himalayan range lies within Indian territory, there are other countries who share the mountain ranges with us. These include Nepal, Bhutan, China and Pakistan. Any comprehensive Climate Change Action Plan for the entire Himalayan zone will, of course, require coordinated action among all stakeholder countries. Some bilateral initiatives are being taken, for example, with China and with Bhutan. But we have to recognise the need for much greater engagement and coordination with all our neighbours which share the Himalayas.

This goodwill is necessary to define where the diplomatic path between the countries can venture to find innovative community-based solutions. It moves away from the zones of conflicts and focusses towards the sustainable environmental practices and shared knowledge. For instance, if the new SAARC Environment and Disaster Management Centre could act as a data-house for water-related issues, it may open doors into improvement in South Asia transboundary water relations. In this arena, one can find opportunities for environmental diplomacy and cooperation. The domestic initiatives and polity need to be strong to achieve the diplomatic gateway, an analysis of some major initiatives taken within India will bring more clarity on the intentions of the government.

Major environment policies during UPA: a domestic growth path maintained

While ensuring that the green path has to be maintained with a stable growth rate is not an easy achievement. The UPA era was able to maintain the average growth rate of 7.8 percent and there were numerous measures taken to protect the environment.

In initial years of coming in power, National Environment Policy, 2006 was promulgated, which ensured environmental protection to be an integral part of the developmental process. This policy provided, “a guide to action in regulatory reform, environmental conservation, and enactment of legislation by government agencies at all levels.” The major principles included, environmental conservation with economic efficiency, legal liabilities, Environment Impact Assessment, ‘polluter pays’ principle to be followed along with human beings at the centre of the sustainable development concerns.

When the environment was looked after with the requisite domestic policies, the international commitments and the motivation for saving environment led to the formation of National Action Plan on Climate Change(NAPCC) in 2008. This was a big scheme encompassing various sectors to fulfil the goals of sustainable development. Their focus has been on balancing the objectives of saving the state from the environmental damage while maintaining a decent development level as mentioned in the policy document, “The NAPCC identifies measures that promote development objectives while addressing climate change.”

The NAPCC has been an all encompassing and a great achievement process for the Indian government. It involved eight missions under its purview namely: National Mission on Sustainable Habitat (NMSH), National Water Mission (NWM), National Mission on Green India, National Mission on Sustaining Himalayan Ecosystem (NMSHE), National Mission on Strategic Knowledge for Climate Change (NMSKCC), National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA), National Mission for Enhanced Energy Efficiency (NMEEE) and National Solar Mission. The government mandated the targets were to be accomplished by various programs of the action plan. After ensuring a committed allocation of resources, the next step was creation of State Action Plan on Climate Change(SAPCC) for the states on the same line.

It would ensure better commitment from states while upholding the federal principles of the constitution. These were compulsions on the state governments to find out measures to achieve the targets. While an action plans charts out a guiding path, a judicial act brings more sanctity to the process. In this duration, a dedicated tribunal was formed to take action against anomalous environmental treatment.

The creation of Green Tribunals happens under the National Green Tribunal Act 2010. Although the ethos of the environment has been in Indian society for centuries, like locals protecting the trees under the Chipko movement in 1973 in Uttarakhand, a tribunal would give environment protection a more legal rational format. The act proposes the environment protection as:

The National Green Tribunal has been established for effective and expeditious disposal of cases relating to environmental protection and conservation of forests and other natural resources including enforcement of any legal right relating to environment and giving relief and compensation for damages to persons and property and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.

The Tribunal is not bound by any specific procedural code but is guided by principles of natural justice. This helps in expanding the scope of the act and bringing more issues under its realm. Also, the accessibility is enhanced as the NGT was set up at five places.

However, even after trying our best for the protection of environment, damages will hamper, keeping in mind that global goods are impacted by global actions, which harm all the parties. In this aspect, climate change has brought severe loss and intensified damages. The increasing impact of disasters is a widely known fact, like the Tsunami of 2004. The government came up with the National Disaster Management Act(NDMA) 2005 and national policy on disaster management in 2009. The NDMA act established the infrastructure for an authority to look into disaster management issues, while the policy expanded the roles and gave broader cover to adaptation and resolution of the issues linked with.

On one side, where it was ensured that new and reformative actions for protection of environment were taken, on another front, the old laws were amended to keep up with the changing times and ensuring security of environment. With the constitutional amendment of Wildlife protection Act twice, in 2006 and in 2013, it is ascertained that the UPA government had major focus on conservation of the wildlife. The amendments

in the act were to make it more inclusive, as the changes included some mandatory provision like consultations with the Gram Sabha before a scheduled area is declared as a sanctuary. The act then also recognised and protected the rights of indigenous people dependent on forests.

Apart from reorganising the old acts, the newer policies had a factor of environment and biodiversity related to it. Like, the employment guarantee scheme National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 included forestry related activities to fast-track reforestation. When policies are designed keeping environment as one of its important focusing points, the probability of causing harm to environment is reduced. This is done for better inclusion of various tribes and indigenous groups in a safe space and providing them with necessary livelihood rights.

However, many countries proclaim to be at the forefront of protecting environment on the international platform, but their policies don't do justice due to their manner of implementation. This happens as rules are moulded to achieve an appropriate economic growth rate. The desire to achieve the economic growth rate is tough for conserving the environment. More stringent steps like these are required to focus on finding the sustainable solutions and reducing unsustainable way of living. But, even after trying hard to maintain the environment protection, it may not be as much as desired for sustainable development. Indian government tried its best to achieve this, as the First Biennial Update Report to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change published in 2015 clearly establishes, “the emissions intensity of Indian GDP has decreased by 12% between 2005 and 2010 on account of a slew of policy measures launched by the Government of India.”

The average GDP growth of India remained at 7.8 percent during the UPA regime, as can be seen in the



given figure.

Fig. 1 Table of GDP growth rate during the UPA rule(CSO 2014):

It is tough to maintain a sustainable growth rate in this duration with turmoil of climate and environment challenges. Even though the policies to save the environment are multiple, and an adequate growth rate was achieved, it could also not be treated as the ultimate parameter of development. Some sustainable solutions like the solar mission or setting up of a National Clean Energy Fund (NCEF) in 2010, by imposing a cess on coal at an effective rate of `50 per tonne of coal, on both, produced domestically and imported into India. These efforts were maintained to support the clean energy technologies.

This is also deduced by the fact as Chandra Bhushan, a prominent environmentalist quoted in his article, ‘Growth of renewable energy in India’ published in 2015, that from 2004-14, “installation of renewable energy for electricity has grown at an annual rate of 25 percent. Along with it, wind power installation has grown ten times and solar energy has grown from nothing to 2,500 MW.” He also mentioned that renewable energy accounted for about 12 percent of the total electricity generation capacity and contributes about 6 percent of the electricity produced in the country by the end of the UPA era.

As already proved by the fact mentioned above, more research into sustainable options and further investment could give a boost to the economy. The UPA government initiated such efforts to bring renewable and alternative energy options, along with investments. The present government has taken many of these

initiatives ahead by increasing the investments and the targets. More diplomatic progress can be garnered if the effective implementation is taken ahead.

Conclusion

It is not easy to maintain the rate of GDP growth and environmental sustainability together. States try to achieve the maximum benefit from the available choices while following a path close to the sustainable development. Such coherence and diplomacy for achievement for preservation and restoration is a part of Indian civilisational values. The steps taken by the UPA government were towards balancing this ethos while being at par with the contemporary developmental practices. This balance is a tough task to achieve, more arduous efforts would have ensured better environmental protection. A good environment is a necessity for the survival of a state and its citizenry, but the international commitments will have almost equal impact as the local policies. What matters in such scenarios, is the initiatives and the willpower of the government to fulfil its international and domestic commitments. The UPA government has tried to achieve certain feat with their concerted efforts, which have been taken ahead with the present government.

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