

Economic, Social and Political trade-offs in Environmental Management

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Increasing populations have brought about their own set of problems. Despite the demographic dividends that country's can reap with the availability of human labour, yet population explosion creates unforeseen stresses and strains on the entire economy making it difficult to prioritise economic, social and political goals. Managing divergent pulls in all spheres becomes difficult to cope with and eventually development itself can be sacrificed at the altar of attaining compromises between conflicting development goals.

Key Words: environment, tradeoffs, development agenda conflicts

Introduction

Of late the environment and its related issues have, for some time, occupied the attention of Governments and policy makers across the globe. Be it the developed, developing or underdeveloped countries; all have some time or the other faced the problem of environmental issues whether in the domestic sphere or as an integral part of the global community. Hence, despite the costs involved in attending to such issues, the environment is slowly but steadily occupying centre stage in all the countries.

Every country, be it developed or developing, is trying to achieve accelerated economic growth by harnessing the natural resources that are a bounty of nature or in their absence, resorting to imports from resource rich countries. Rapid development can be achieved only with the help of the technology which helps to combine these scarce resources effectively for enhanced national output or national income. This becomes necessary where countries with large and growing populations are normally forced to adopt such ways and means for getting onto the highway of fast growth, that maybe in

effect detrimental to the society and the environment. This leads to stresses and strains in economic management. Striking examples of such adoption of technology are rampant across countries and are not without their inherent flaws and work to the detriment of the environment. For example, the rampant use of computers and electronic machines and their fast obsolescence due to fast technological inventions and innovations has created mounting e-waste that is proving a difficult and virtually impossible task to manage. Simple day to day usage of technology though contributing to increased comfort and convenience is fraught with dangers posed to the environment. A glaring example is the use of poly-bags or what in common parlance are called "jhabla" bags which were such an integral part of day to day existence in Mumbai and other cities across India, that they posed a serious threat to water drainage issues during the monsoons. Coastal mangroves too have fallen prey to the rampant use of such bags. Tons of city waste reeked of these non bio-degradable waste and it was only time before the Government had to ban the use of such

poly bags and resort to 0.5 micron bags. Once again we had to resort to the age old use of the jhola, however non-fashionable it looked. Some termed this as the return to the past!! Recycled paper bags and such alternatives have been increasingly used as alternate solutions. Thus technology provides solutions to apparently improve life and the conveniences offered, however convenience in the short term has a much larger negative impact embedded within, which is not so evident till the damage is done.

Closer reading indicates that such occurrences have their political and economic dimensions too. Environmental impacts or decisions are to be taken considering the larger impacts that such decisions would have. In recent times, the tremendous boost that real estate activity has got, is not without its negative impacts too. For example the rapid growth of the service and the manufacturing sector have prompted rather enticed large tracts of land to be used for constructing residential, commercial or shopping complex's or malls and land earlier available for agriculture is fast dwindling. Growing population, would mean that the demand for agricultural products rises in step with the growth in population but dwindling agricultural land would mean that agricultural production would not be in step with the demand. Though the green revolution and its use of technology to enhance agricultural produce is well documented yet, the inadequacies of the very same technology are for all to see. Rampant use of fertilizers in the use of adding nutrients to the soil have created lopsided use of urea fertilizers rather than the NPK variety. The entire agricultural policy of subsidy in the fertilizer industry

is based on this usage and its need to keep agricultural prices in check and its impact is for all to see. Other striking examples that need mention are the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Tehri Dam agitation which brought the entire debate of environment-development trade-off to the forefront. Thus, though development or growth comes at a cost yet sometimes development or public policy takes precedence over the environment. It is another issue that bad and lop-sided development policies have contributed to concentration of development in certain pockets of the country and large areas remain undeveloped or devoid of any plans for development contributing to the geographical and economic disparities that are ever widening within this country.

Nevertheless what is important is that the environment and the impact of development on environment need to be the focus of attention in whatever steps we are taking to enhance growth and development in the country.

Government policy can not only safeguard the environment through effective policy enactments, but often it is subservient to the needs of the economy. Diesel as a fuel is known to be an extremely polluting fuel, yet with the skew between diesel and petrol prices in India and the impacts on the fortunes of the oil industry, yet because of its usage pattern the Government is unable to bring about a uniformity in diesel-petrol prices, and it is not able to reduce the subsidy element in diesel pricing too. Fuel price rise as a director of fuel demand is not working as the Government wants it to, because of the inflation sensitivity of the fuel prices. Any increase in diesel / fuel prices contributes directly to inflation and impacts the

economy as well as the political fortunes of Governments in India. Hence, policy changes have to tread a safe path and more often than not, environment succumbs to the stresses and strains of political pressures within the country.

A country as large as India along with the complexity of issues involved, marrying

Economics, Politics and Environment will always be an onerous task for any Government. In such a scenario what is right and what is wrong or what is appropriate and inappropriate is anybody's guess. Though seemingly easy, practically it is worse than walking on the knife's edge.

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