

Comment

A Place in the Sun

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The UN sponsored discussions to prepare a global convention on climate began in February in USA. The aim is to prepare a legally binding convention to curb gaseous emissions leading to a much feared climate destabilisation. This convention is being seen as the world's greatest commitment to the environment and its future generations.

But, if negotiated in ignorance or in haste, Third World politicians may, in the name of global charity, be selling away the interests of the present and future generations in the developing world.

Scientists have found that the quantity of gases like carbon dioxide, methane and chlorofluorocarbons is increasing in the earth's atmosphere. It is widely believed that these gases will trap the sun's rays and heat up the earth. Also termed 'greenhouse effect' or 'global warming', the fear is that this could destabilise the world's climate, increase floods and droughts, melt the polar ice caps, raise the level of the sea

and drown large parts of countries like India, Bangladesh and Maldives. While scientists seem to be convinced that global warming is imminent, none can say with any certainty which country or region of the world will be affected, and by how much.

The exercise of blaming developing countries has already begun. Until recently it was widely accepted that developed countries of the West consume most of the world's fossil fuels and they produce most of the carbon dioxide, the main cause of global warming. But, sustained propaganda, in recent years, blames deforestation in developing countries and generation of methane through irrigated rice farming and the keeping of cattle. This has shifted the onus on to developing countries. Recently the World Resources Institute (WRI), an independent American organisation, UNEP and UNDP jointly released a report, *World Resources 1990-91*, which for the first time, said that India, China and Brazil are amongst the top five countries responsible for the accumulation of these gases in the

earth's atmosphere. And that developing countries, as a whole, contribute almost half the emissions in the world.

But a re-look at the WRI-UN data of each country's gaseous emissions, shows that neither India nor China are responsible for even one kilogramme of carbon dioxide or methane accumulations and the Third World share is much less. The differences in these conclusions, based as they are on the same data, are because of the patently unfair mathematical jugglery used in the WRI-UN report.

Large quantities of carbon dioxide and methane produced through human activities every year are absorbed by the earth's environment. Carbon dioxide is largely absorbed by the world's oceans and methane by the earth's troposphere. Therefore, the issue is not how much carbon dioxide or methane each country produces but how much of each of these gases is produced over and above the earth's natural ability to cleanse the atmosphere.

In other words, no country can be blamed for the gases accumulating in the earth's atmosphere until each country's share in the earth's cleansing ability has been apportioned on an equitable and fair basis. Since most of the cleansing is done by the oceans and the troposphere, the earth's cleansing ability, also known as the natural sinks of methane and carbon dioxide, has to be treated as a common heritage of humankind. Good environmental management demands that all nations should learn to live within the earth's ability to absorb these gaseous wastes.

Since there is no reason to believe that any human being in any part of the world is more or less important than another, the world's cleansing ability should be

apportioned to each country in proportion to its share of the world's population. India, with sixteen per cent of the world's population, therefore, gets sixteen per cent of the earth's natural sinks. India produces carbon dioxide just equal to six per cent of the world's natural sinks and methane equal to fourteen per cent of the natural sinks. How can India then be blamed? The same is true for most developing countries. But all Western countries are emitting well beyond their permissible shares of carbon dioxide and methane sinks. It is, therefore, Western wastes and wiful overconsumption of the world's natural resources that is polluting the earth and threatening everyone's environment.

It is in the allocation of the 'sink' that the politics lie. The WRI-UN has adopted a mathematical strategy which allocates the sink to each country on the basis of its quantum of emissions — giving the largest pollutor the largest share of the sink.

This manner of calculating each nation's responsibility is extremely unfair and amounts to a scientific sleight of hand. Take the case of USA. According to WRI and UN calculations, USA produced 4500 million tonnes (mt) of carbon dioxide, only 980 mt of its emissions accumulated in the atmosphere, while 2521 mt got absorbed by the natural sinks. But India which produced 1077 mt of carbon dioxide became responsible for 476 mt accumulations, while 601 mt got absorbed by the earth's environment. So India which is 3.4 times the size of USA in population gets less than one-fourth of the share that USA gets of the natural sink, humankind's common heritage.

The methane issue raises further questions of justice and morality. Can we really equate the carbon dioxide contributions of gas guzzling automobiles in Europe and North

America or, for that matter, anywhere in the Third World with the methane emissions of draught cattle and rice fields of subsistence farmers in West Bengal or Thailand? Do these people not have a right to live? But no effort has been made in WRI's report to separate the 'survival emissions' of the poor, from the 'luxury emissions' of the rich. Just what kind of politics or morality is this which masquerades in the name of 'one worldism' and 'high minded internationalism'?

What we are seeing here is not just bad science but also politically motivated data masquerading in the name of science. The South must insist that global environmental concerns cannot be chosen on an ad hoc basis. If issues like climate change are put on the global agenda, then it is equally important to put environmental problems like desertification, land and water degradation, and deteriorating terms of trade of biomass products that are discounting the future of both present and future generations in the Third World. The global environmental agenda, as it is being framed by the West, must be questioned. The agenda itself has become politics. Global citizenship demands global caring and sharing not global hysteria and fiats.

Given the East-West detente, and the global market system, it is unlikely that the Third World can ever disassociate itself from it. The Third World, therefore, has to fight and insist upon better terms of trade, acceptance of its own ecological concerns, and a fair share in the global environmental commons. Third World politicians cannot afford to negotiate badly and cheaply or in ignorance and, thus, forsake the interests of their future generations for some Meryl Streep-kind of mushy environmentalism that is today being beamed into India's homes in the name of environmental education ♣