

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES GAPS AS A THREAT TO HUMAN SECURITY: A CASE OF NATURAL CATASTROPHE IN UTTARAKHAND HIMALAYS IN INDIA

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Abstract

In the present era human security has emerged as one of the most important non traditional security threats therefore, it becomes essential to discuss the causes which are endangering the human security. The environmental degradation is one of the factors which has a serious bearing on the human security. The increasing number of deaths due to the natural disasters like floods, earthquakes, landslides, cyclones indicates towards this phenomenon. Though, the natural calamities can neither be predicted nor stopped but with timely planning and policies losses can be mitigated. There are examples particularly from the US and Japan which though are prone to natural calamities, but with proper policies and timely action the risk is mitigated and human lives are saved. On the other hand, if we talk in the context of Himalayan states of South Asia we find that these are not only the worst sufferer of natural calamities due to growing environmental crisis but also the lack of preparedness in mitigation techniques. Of late the Indian Himalayan states have also been witnessing the instances of incessant rains, landslides, cloudbursts and flash floods. Though there are several policies for environmental protection, human security, mitigation of disaster but the poor implementation, governance, monitoring and management is not allowing the full advantage of these. The heavy loss of life due to nature's fury in Uttarakhand Himalayas in India in June 2013 indicates towards the gaps in policies and implementation. This allows one to perceive that unless and until the policies are implemented correctly the human security would remain threatened by the environmental or natural causes. Present paper proposes not only to analyse how environmental policy gaps threaten the human security but also to discuss the triggers which led to the massive natural tragedy causing huge loss of human life at Kedarnath in Uttarakhand Himalayas in India in June 2013.

Introduction

Though, in the past few years, India has registered impressive growth and emerged as the third largest growing economy of the world however at the

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same time extensive and increased environmental degradation is also being witnessed in India. The agents necessary for human security and sustainability like air, water and soil have become so polluted in the urban areas that these are leading to various problems, life threatening diseases and making these cities unlivable. On the other hand the adverse impact due to climatic changes on the availability of natural resources like agriculture, river water, forests on which majority of the poor who live in the rural areas are dependent is also affecting their security. India's northern remote and mountainous regions are also witnessing environmental excesses due to loss of forest cover, soil degradation, sedimentation etc. which are leading to loss of lives, livelihood, displacement and increased migration to safe areas by the inhabitants, thus making the human life difficult and insecure. The other Himalayan states of the Hind Kush region are also witnessing the environmental problems which are not only promoting unrest and resource scarcity but also natural calamities. According to the State of the World's Forests, 2007, the world has four billion hectares of forest, covering about 30 percent of the world's land area, however deforestation is going on at an alarming rate of 13 million hectares (ha) a year and with the result the world has lost three percent of its total forest area between 1990 to 2005¹. There is a strong link between degradation of forest, environmental losses, human action and growing natural calamities in the Himalayan states which is posing a threat to the human security.

Concept of Security and linkages between Environmental Policy Gaps and Human Security

Security in traditional and general sense revolves around security from external threats and this concept of military security from external threat or the absence of threat to acquired values has been in vogue from the time of Kautiyla to Plato to Machiavelli and Hobbes. For the realist and neo- realist security is related to the security of state's territory and independence because if the state is secure then those who live in the state are also considered secure and such security is achieved by power or use of threat. But a number of new threats and challenges like the economic threats, trade wars, environmental threats, socio-political divisions, cyber crimes, and cultural attacks have widened the scope of security. Now the political, economic, social, human, environmental, national, regional, communal, household and individual issues also form the components of security. Although these challenges are not as effective as the economic or military threats but they are capable of increasing human insecurity and threatening peace of the societies therefore Richard Ullman² Barry Buzan,³

¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, "State of the World's Forests, 2007," available at <<http://www.fao.org/docrep/009/a0773e/a0773e00.htm>> (accessed on June 01, 2015).

² Richard Ullman: Redefining Security. *International Security*, Vol.8, 1983, pp.129-53.

Jessica Mathews⁴ have advocated the need to widen the traditional areas of national security by including the economic, environmental, resource and demographic issues. In fact the human security can be threatened from a number of direct and indirect threats like violent death, dehumanization, discrimination, deprivation, displacement, environmental degradation, disease, international conflicts, spread of destructive weapons, underdevelopment, natural and manmade disasters. These factors, capable of degrading the quality of human life, depriving human beings from the basic needs, denying bodily safety and well being cannot be ignored because these directly have a bearing on the overall security of a state. The environmental factors like the paucity of clean water, air, poverty, deforestation, soil erosion, flooding etc. are capable of not only provoking unrest in the societies, promoting migration and displacement but also endangering the bodily safety and well being of the people. Due to this reason the environmental issues are being seen as prime threats to the human security and the growing number of natural calamities and their adverse impact on the human lives is a cause of anxiety and worry for everyone. Although natural calamities can neither be predicted nor stopped but the effective disaster management, mitigation and implementation of policies could increase the bodily safety of the people and make their lives secure. The proper implementation of the environmental policies and their monitoring is a must for the safety of human life as the natural hazards are converted into calamities if the magnitude of losses increases. The human elements like strong population growth and density of population, unplanned and unregulated human settlements, rising pollution, deliberate violation of policies, environmental degradation and poverty assists the transformation of natural hazards into disasters and enhances the magnitude of vulnerability and risk to human lives. It is estimated that in 1998 some 22 million people were forced to leave their homes for environmental reasons and the growing desertification, soil degradation, scarcity of water, building of big dams could further displace nearly 100 million people in the coming years.⁵ The environmental conditions have forced approximately 10 million Bengalis to migrate to neighbouring states of India like Assam, Tripura and West Bengal. The melting of the Himalayan Glaciers, which are the source of water for approximately 500 million people of the world could cause massive floods followed by acute water

³ Barry Buzan: *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post- Cold War Era*. London, Harvester Wheatsheaf. 1991.

⁴ Jessica Mathews: *The Environment and International Security*, In Klare and Thomas ed. *World Security: Trends and Challenges at Century's End*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

⁵ John Battle, "Environmental Security: Anticipating and Tackling Threats". Speech given at the conference on environment and security, Wilton Park, on March 1, 2001, p. 2, available at <https://www.iisd.org/pdf/2002/envsec_conserving_peace.pdf> (accessed on July 23, 2013).