

Prospects for Justice in India's Socio-environmental Conflicts

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According to Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas), India has the most socio-environmental conflicts in the world. EJAtlas is an interactive map that documents environmental conflicts around the world. Although the map does not provide a comprehensive list of conflicts, it does provide enough data to draw conclusions. The atlas covers different types of environmental conflicts including those related to mineral ores and building materials extraction, waste management, biomass and land conflicts, fossil fuels and climate justice, and water management. Among these conflicts, water management seems to be the most contentious issue in India. This paper discusses socio-environmental conflicts in India and explores the prospects for environmental justice. It explores the resistance taking place on the ground and shows the people behind the movements and the protests.

Keywords: conflict, justice, EJAtlas, extractivism, resistance

Introduction to EJAtlas

The EJAtlas is an ongoing project launched in March 2014 that aims to catalogue the ecological distribution of environmental conflicts around the world (Roy and Martinez-Alier 2019). The atlas documents environmental conflicts in over 133 countries dating all the way back to 1919. With such a long historical and geographic stretch, the atlas is by no means a complete catalogue of socio-environmental conflicts. According to Joan Martinez Alier, coordinator of the EJAtlas, coverage of conflicts is growing on the atlas as more conflicts are added every year (Dasgupta 2016). EJAtlas uses a bottom-up approach when it comes to documenting conflicts. Local activists and researchers are responsible for reporting on conflicts which are then added to the atlas along with other relevant sources. Despite the gaps in terms of coverage, Joan Martinez Alier believes that the atlas does provide enough data to make conclusions (Dasgupta 2016).

Upon entering the EJAtlas webpage, researchers can search for conflicts by region, country, type of conflict or by the impact on society. The atlas covers a variety of environmental conflicts including land, biodiversity conservation, water management, waste management, and several other types. Researchers also have the option to locate specific conflicts by outcome, year, or by commodity such as land or specific mineral resources. EJAtlas is, therefore, a great tool for researchers and scholars interested in socio-environmental conflicts. The next section discusses environmental conflicts in India. First, I look at the overall distribution of conflicts by type. After that, I discuss how specific conflicts unfolded in order to show the people behind the protests and the movements.

Finally, I explore the prospects for environmental justice for those who struggle against the neoliberalization of nature.

Distribution of Environmental Conflicts in India

According to EJAtlas, India has the most socio-environmental conflicts in the world. At the time of writing this paper, India had a total of 322 recorded conflicts on the EJAtlas. That is almost 11 percent of the 2954 conflicts recorded worldwide. Of the 322 conflicts recorded in India, 74 of them were related to water management. Many of these conflicts are found in the Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh and mostly related to hydroelectric projects. Many of these projects are planned without consultation with local communities which is the main cause of resistance (Manupriya 2016).

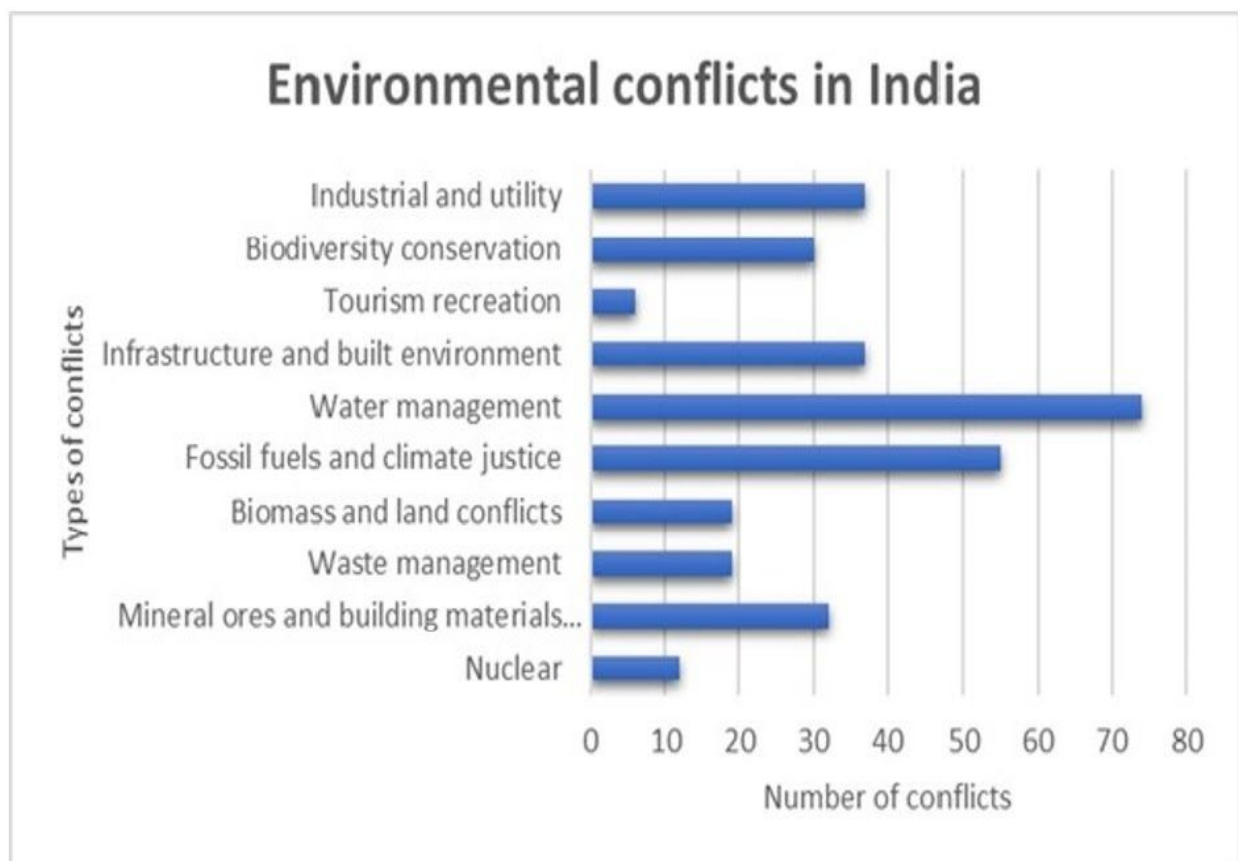


Figure 1. Number of conflicts in India by type (Data from EJAtlas)

India also has many conflicts related to fossil fuels and climate justice, industrial and utility, and the extraction of mineral ores and building materials. According to Rao (2018), the significant appropriation of land and natural resources is to push the 'growth story' of India. This appropriation, argues Rao (2018), intensified with the neoliberal turn in India. Other scholars refer to the environmental turn of capitalism as the neoliberalization of nature (Frame n.d.)

Resistance from Below

The neoliberalization of nature in India has been met with fierce resistance from local communities and activist groups. An example of a recent conflict over water management is the Pancheshwar Dam construction project planned in Uttarakhand (EJAtlas). According to EJAtlas, the conflict started in 2017 and about 30 000 families are to be displaced as a result of the project. Other environmental impacts include biodiversity loss, risk of flooding, food insecurity and decreasing water quality. The main proponent in resisting the construction of the dam is a local political party called Uttarakhand Kranti Dal and Himdhara Collective which is an environmental research group.

Another example of recent environmental conflict in India is a conflict related to the mining and transportation of iron in Sonshi, Goa, India. According to EJAtlas, the conflict started in 2016 and a population of about 1000 was affected. Due to the sustained resistance by local political parties and indigenous communities, the project was subsequently stopped. However, villagers are concerned that they might have to take to the streets again if the mining resumes. Local political parties and indigenous communities used several mobilization tactics such as blockades, street protests, official letters, and petitions. The protest led to 45 villagers being arrested for unlawful assembly and criminal intimidation (Khan 2017). According to Khan (2017), the villagers had formed a human chain to stop mining vehicles moving through Sonshi. The impact of iron ore mining may include environmental degradation which may lead to poor health for those living in the vicinity of the mine.

The transformation of the environment through infrastructural construction has also been met with resistance in some cases. An example of this is the acquisition of land for the construction of the Chennai-Salem 8 lane expressway in Tamil Nadu. The construction of the 277 km highway requires 2791 hectares of land, which includes agricultural land, community land and resident plots (EJAtlas). There are 159 villages with a population of up to 12 000 to be affected. Groups mobilizing against this project include women, farmers, indigenous communities, social movements, and local political parties. The project, according to Jayaraman (2018), may have been conceived in just 6 days based on the recommendations of a World-Bank-blacklisted consultant. The project also had other socio-economic impacts such as increased corruption, the co-optation of different actors and violations of human rights. At the time of writing, decisions regarding the Chennai-Salem 8 lane expressway had not been finalized.

In all the conflicts discussed above, local communities and social movements play a vital role. These groups organize themselves to protect their lands, resources and cultural identities. In some cases, they succeed to have the projects halted or stopped altogether. Often though, their resistance is met with violent repression from the state that uses its monopoly of force for the ends of capitalism. There are numerous conflicts on the EJAtlas that show increasing militarization and police presence following a protest. The question then, is how do we balance environmental justice and socio-economic development? We must remember that most of these conflicts occur in some of the poorest communities located in some of the richest locations in terms of mineral deposits. In the following section, I discuss the need to strike a balance between socio-economic development and environmental justice. I also discuss the prospects for environmental justice in India.

Environmental Justice and Socio-economic Development: Striking the Balance

Before proceeding, it is perhaps necessary to provide a brief history of environmental justice. The environmental justice movement started in the U.S. in the 1980s due to the unequal distribution of environmental health risks that affected mostly African Americans, Latinos, and Native American communities (Bullard 1993). In the U.S., the language of the environmental justice movement was that of racism and had direct links to the Civil Rights movement (Martinez-Alier 2014). The quest for environmental justice also spread to other parts of the world that experienced environmental inequalities. South Africa is a good example as the country also experienced severe environmental injustice during colonialism and apartheid. In short, environmental can be defined as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies (US EPA 2019).” In a world where the extraction of mineral resources is a key logic of contemporary capitalism (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), it can be said that environmental injustice will remain an important challenge of our time.

Proponents of mineral-led development often entice local communities to accept mining projects in their communities with promises of jobs, infrastructure and an overall better quality of life (Grice 2018). These are usually some of the poorest and most vulnerable communities whose environments are gradually incorporated within the calculus of global capital. The United Nations (UN) has responded to the plight of indigenous communities by introducing a specific right that pertains to them. The Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is a right recognized by the UN to empower indigenous communities when it comes to decisions regarding their environment. As the name suggests, ‘free’ means that consent to any mining activity on indigenous land must be without coercion, fear or intimidation. ‘Prior’ means that consent must be sought in advance before proceeding with any mining activity on indigenous land. ‘Informed’ means that local communities must have access to all the necessary information in order to guide their decisions. ‘Consent’ means that a collective decision must be made by the relevant authorities after a customary decision-making process has been followed (Food and Agriculture Organization n.d).

According to Dilay, Diduck, and Patel (2019), India has also put measures in place to address the procedural aspect of environmental justice. For example, India’s Supreme Court introduced ‘green benches’ within the court to issue judgments regarding the environment. In 2010, India also introduced the National Green Tribunal Act that deals with cases related to environmental protection and conservation. Such judicial innovations are a step in the right direction, however, some challenges remain. These include restricted access to legal services for poor communities who often lack financial resources (Dilay, Diduck and Patel 2019).

It is true that many countries depend on mining for economic growth (Lisk, Besada, and Martin 2013). Even the construction of infrastructures such as railroads, highways, and ports usually serve to facilitate the transportation of extracted minerals. One of the key challenges of our time then is to strike a balance between economic development and environmental justice. Going forward, India faces similar questions that most mineral-rich countries face. Among these questions is: how do we ensure that the cost of economic development does not disproportionately affect certain parts of the population, in this case, the poor? In other words, how do we develop the economy without committing environmental injustice? Environmental injustice tends to thrive in countries where racial, ethnic, tribal, or class differences still hold sway in society. Therefore, environmental justice, in some way, also depends on closely examining these differences to find out who is being affected.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed how to use the EJAtlas for researching conflicts related to the environment. Despite the gaps in the atlas in terms of coverage, its creators believe that it does provide enough data to make conclusions. The atlas showed that India has the most environmental conflicts in the world. Most of these conflicts are related to water management. Many of them are related to fossil fuels and climate justice. This large number of conflicts reflect India's turn to the environment for economic development. Local communities, political parties, and indigenous populations often resist large scale projects that threaten their livelihoods. They adopt different mobilization tactics such as blockades, protests, petitions, or writing official letters. Sometimes they succeed in having projects stopped. Sometimes, however, their resistance is met with force and violence by the state.

As far as environmental justice is concerned, the UN and the Indian judicial system have put measures in place in order to empower indigenous populations. However, such benefits often fail to reduce the plight of indigenous communities who lack sufficient access to legal services. It was also noted that environmental injustice usually thrives in societies where racial, ethnic, tribal or class differences still hold sway. Therefore, dealing with environmental injustice, in some way, requires a reckoning with these differences in order to see who is affected. These are by no means the only steps towards environmental justice. Indeed, there is a lot to be done and part of it is to gauge the extent of environmental injustice. This is where tools such as EJAtlas come in.

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