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Green Populism: Politics and Policies

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Abstract

Multifaceted environmental challenges confronting the planet necessitate comprehensive strategies transcending the isolated, small-scale and localised initiatives. The complexity of contemporary environmental questions demands solutions that are both globally coordinated and locally implemented. This requires a multifaceted approach with a steadfast commitment to environmental stewardship. Green politics offers a framework that integrates ecological sustainability with social equity and strives to address environmental issues by advocating sustainable development, social justice and grassroots democracy. Green Populism is a recent phenomenon that sits at the intersection of populism, environmentalism and the multi-layered political challenges to ecological conservation. It may be denoted as a developing strand of populist politics exploring how populist movements frame environmental debates in terms of the 'people' versus the 'elite'.

Index Words Populism, Green Politics, Green Populism, Environmental Degradation.

Introduction

A recent two-year UNEP (UN Environment Programme) study conducted by almost 70 scientists from 30 research organizations reports an ecological catastrophe, 'the rupture of Europe's Nord Stream gas pipelines', projecting as one of the 'largest human-caused release of methane' on the planet (UNEP Jan 15, 2025). The UNEP declared the year 2024 as the 'hottest year on record', raising a lurid alarm about the 'one often-overlooked gas: nitrous oxide' – a compound that heats the planet 'hundreds of times faster than carbon dioxide' (UNEP Jan 16, 2025). What has been the global response to these hazardous events? The answer is – a customary call by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to cut the emissions by at least 30 per cent by 2030 - in order to keep the goals of the Paris agreement living (UNEP Jan 16, 2025) - an agenda first proposed at the 'Toronto Conference' 1988, (Philander 2012) and later formally

picked up at conferences like the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. Interestingly, 2024 was also the year of ‘mega elections’ in which more than 60 countries across the globe, including major democracies of India, UK and USA, went to vote and reasserted right-wing populism (Wike, Fagan and Clancy 2024). But unfortunately, the critical issue of climate change failed to make any entry into the mainstream election campaigns. Despite the fact that Elizabeth Kolbert, the renowned American journalist and author of *The Sixth Extinction, An Unnatural History* (2014), empirically established that the planet is on the verge of facing the 6th mass extinction due to anthropogenic causes (Kolbert 2014, pp. 4-22), surveys in the run-up to the said elections found U.S as the most ‘ideologically divided’ country on the issue of climate change (Wike, Fagan and Clancy 2024).

Case studies cited above are only the recent few from amongst a multitude of environment problems faced by the world since nineteenth-century industrialization and the rat-race to conquer *Nature* in the name of development. Christophe Wills in his 2013 work, *Green Equilibrium: The Vital Balance of Humans & Nature* has argued that the man destroys the intricate green equilibrium at his own peril, instigating not only the loss of eco-diversity but also the opportunity of ‘change [adaptability] and survival in near future’ (Wills 2013, p. 226). The global responses are not more than a piecemeal approach which can at best be termed ‘incremental’ but insufficient. As a theory of public policy, *Incrementalism* is most closely associated with political scientist Charles E. Lindblom, who introduced the concept in his 1959 paper ‘The Science of Muddling Through,’ suggesting changes through small, measured, gradual and fragmented steps instead of sweeping reforms and revolutionary approaches to policy change, focusing more on ‘what is feasible’ rather than ‘optimal’ (Lindblom 1959, pp. 79–88). Also known as ‘disjointed incrementalism’, the approach is considered as sluggish, to say the least, in addressing the problems related to environment and social justice.

The irony of almost all environmental issues facing the planet today is that any solution-based activity would not yield long-lasting result if undertaken on a small scale, thereby demanding a robust national as well as a global policy-decisions necessitating a dynamic interplay of national interest, developmental growth strategies, environment policies and market politics. Since this question affect variable interests of the industrialists, corporates, workers, small business-houses, consumers, and householders, the governments face direct economic and political challenges in addressing them, pushing the entire subject to be get meshed up in ‘Green Politics’. Even though the mankind suffers natural catastrophes regularly, uprooting societies in the process, as the recent case of forest fire in California in the US clearly shows, the pertinent problem impeding the solution of ‘*environmental emergency*’ is the ‘evergreening of green politics’ in high table conferences without substantial assiduousness on the ground.

Green Politics

As a political ideology, green politics strive to address environmental issues by majorly advocating sustainable development, social justice and grassroots democracy. Global policy responses towards environmental issues cannot squarely be tracked before 1960s and 1970s, the decades that started witnessing some concerns to green-problems at the national and international levels. This became possible

with the efforts of scholars like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962) and Murray Bookchin's *Our Synthetic Environment* (Bookchin 1975), the works that drew the world's attention to the damages caused to the wild-life and humans by the increasing use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers in agriculture, artificial food additives in food and agro industry, and the harmful X-rays leading to a series of human illnesses, including cancer. Such efforts were substantiated by the activism of NGOs like Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth (1971) and other eco-warriors who started picking problems like pollution, depleting reserves of fossil fuels, deforestation and the like. Nonetheless, it was not before 1980s when the environmental issues started attracting some seriousness and discussions at the international fora, primarily because of their peculiar 'transnational character' of being 'no respecters of borders' (Heywood 2011, pp. 384-85).

The 'ideological' and 'political debates' are ascribed by environment scholars primarily to the fundamental variance in cognising the 'relationship between humankind and the natural world.' Citing John Locke (1632–1704), for whom the human beings are the 'the masters and possessors of nature', the *anthropocentric* perception of nature is seen at the core of the traditional understanding of the environment (Heywood 2011, p. 386). The notion of human being as the 'tamer' and the 'conqueror' of the Natural world reinforces the understanding of *Nature* being the 'facilitator of human needs'. In fact, the irony of coloniality has been that all those societies possessing the histories and culture of seeing Nature as 'divine', 'giver' and 'friend' were designated as savage, conservative, backward and tribal. And, today *Eco-friendly* has become the popular fad-word, used by the capitalist economies to market their products by attaching an emotional value of environment ethics. The stark fact remains, the economic priorities always take a precedence over environmental concerns, a universal phenomenon of today's world, well-captured by Allan Schnaiberg in his argument of Treadmill of Production (TOP) principle (Schnaiberg 1980, pp. 233-34). His work *The Environment: From Surplus to Scarcity* brings out the quagmire of capitalist economies that require an essential expansion of production in order to meet the market demand, leading to continuous environmental degradation. He justly assails, 'Myopia exists when social scientists concentrate only on the environment movement, and not the social context from which it arises' (Schnaiberg 1980, p. 4).

Scenario has not altered much since 1980s, for environment problems may have deepened but hardly the concerns, making Schnaiberg's concerns that 'Academics are less attracted to this area, which lacks both prestige and finding' (Schnaiberg, p. 3) a truth even today. Based on the emphasis that different scholars place on diverse problems and their ensuing resolutions, green politics can be said to have four major traditions – Reformist Ecology, Eco-Anarchism, Eco-Socialism, and Deep Ecology. The term 'ecology' was coined by Ernst Haeckel, a German biologist, in 1866 defining it as the 'study of relationships between organisms and their environment.' Later, with the growing awareness and recognition that flora and fauna of the planet is a self-sustained and a self-regulating natural system, Ecology developed as a separate branch of biology. Also known as 'modernist' or 'shallow ecology' the *Reformist Ecology* endeavours to integrate the ecological principles within the framework of capitalist modernity, seeking to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability. Recognising

the principle of 'Limits to Growth', after the *Report for The Club of Rome's Project* (Meadows, et al. 1972), it offers market-driven solutions to check environmental degradation. However, critics argue it as insufficient for ecological protection since it fails to challenge the capitalist-driven growth-model. Giddens, known for his Third Way environmentalism propose a middle path between state-regulated eco-system and a free-market environmentalism (neoliberalism) (Giddens 2001). The central idea of *Eco-Anarchism* is that environment gets the setback majorly from the structures of hierarchies and centralized institutions. They argue that the decentralized, self-governed communities, cooperative societies can best serve the environment by supporting the local initiatives of the people. *Eco-socialism* also known as *radical ecology* considers capitalist modernity itself as the root-cause of environmental degradation, and suggest more far-reaching, and in some cases even revolutionary policy changes. Andre Gorz, a key figure in eco-socialism argued that capitalism is inherently unsustainable (Gorz 1980). The term Radical Ecology is associated with Robyn Eckersley, who introduced it in her 1992 book *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Eco-centric Approach*, distinguishing it from the mainstream environmentalism (Eckersley 1992). The central concern of her book is to treat nature in its own right with its intrinsic value, and not as an instrument of human fulfilment and progress. In this respect her approach converges with that of deep-ecologists which drives Murphy to remark that 'a more accurate title for Eckersley's book might therefore be 'The Political Economy of Deep Ecology' (Murphy 1993).

Deep Ecology, also known as *Eco-centrism* is the idea that Nature has an intrinsic value of its own and cannot be taken to be an 'instrument' for human development. Proposed by Arne Naess it calls for a radical shift in human values and lifestyles to protect nature (Naess 1973). Deriving its core from the spiritual connection with the nature, the tradition advocates equal worth for all life forms and demands a paradigm shift in seeing the world 'strictly in terms of interconnectedness and interdependence' (Heywood 2011, p. 390). However, for Dobson, Green Politics transcends the boundaries of ideologies, philosophies and traditions and has a 'reformist as well as a radical wing', since it seeks to act 'as a kind of puritan policeman' (Dobson 2007, p.190.) He says:

Ecologism cannot be 'reduced' to any of the ideologies...Unlike any other ideology, ecologism is concerned in a foundational way with the relationship between human beings and their natural environment...its belief in the limits to material growth and its opposition to anthropocentrism, are nowhere to be found in liberalism, conservatism and socialism (Dobson 2007, p. 188).

If we go back in history, we will find almost all tribal societies practising deep ecology even before it was remotely conceptualised by any scholar. A study commissioned under the Australian High Commission shows how the native aboriginal culture is inherently rooted in eco-centrism since the 'human and ecological rights are most properly embedded each within the other' (Rose 1996, p. 86). In the same vein, V. Deloria, a scholar and activist explore the intersection of indigenous spirituality, environmental ethics, history, and politics (Deloria 1999). Likewise, many Native American Tribes (USA) consider the 'Land as a Living Entity', a concept almost identical to one existing in India from the primordial times. The concept of 'Mother Earth' is deeply rooted in the traditional ecological wisdom and spiritual traditions of India for example the ancient Vedic texts (e.g., Rig Veda, Upanishads) have always seen nature as 'sacred.'

Critiquing the Western development models, V. Shiva reflects that rural women are the primary protectors of nature and biodiversity because for them the 'ancient Indian world-view' that *Prakriti* is the 'feminine principle from which all life arises' is rooted in their being (Shiva 1988, pp. xv-xvi). The *Gaia* (Greek Earth goddess) hypothesis, proposed by James Lovelock proposes that the Earth operates as a self-regulating living system and the humans should live in harmony with its mechanism (1972, 2000), indicating that interference with this process entail the obvious risks of disrupting the balance to the detriment of the entire humankind.

Green Populism

'Populism' can be understood to be a style of political mobilization that projects itself as the real voice of the common man against that of the self-serving elites. Since there are innumerable ways and political contexts in which it manifests itself, one authoritative definition of the phenomena becomes difficult. However, one cannot but agree with Mudde and Kaltwasser that, 'Populism' a 'label seldom claimed' but 'ascribed to others', is one of the leading 'political buzzwords of the 21st century', and is generally understood to bear a negative overtone (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, p. 1-2). Taggart in his work *Populism* brings out its core as anti-establishment, though the concept lacks a detailed ideological question or a coherent doctrine (Taggart 2000). Since the concept of populism coalesces with 'authoritarianism' it is often seen as anti-environment since environmental values are supposed to be often associated with 'liberal elite' (W. Davies 2019). So, what is Green Populism?

Green Populism is a recent phenomenon that sits at the intersection of populism, environmentalism and the multi-layered political challenges that surround the ever-deepening environmental concerns today. When political leaders, both on the left and right, champion the cause of environment and rally the 'people' against the perceived elites to either embrace or challenge the environmental agendas, it may be termed as *Green Populism*. It may equally be applied either to populist leaders adopting environmental idioms, or environmental drives adopting populist style and language. It may be signified as a developing strand of populist politics exploring how populist movements frame environmental debates in terms of the 'people' versus the 'elite'. Though there is no officially documented 'first use' of the term, its conceptual roots go back to discussions of ecological questions lying at the intersection of political science, environmental studies, sociology and human rights. 'As ecological issues become increasingly severe and urgent', remarks Cong Fu, 'populist ideologies and strategies have started to permeate green politics' (Fu 2025, p.6). This permeation seems to trespass the political leanings of ideology since the urgency lies for the entire humankind rather than any particular group, 'providing a green value and cultural identity' beyond the spectrum of 'left' and 'right' (Fu 2025, p. 8).

There are studies that pick up the case of Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teenage who stirred an international movement to battle climate change in May 2018 under the sign of 'school strike for climate' (BBC 24 May 2019). One such study is *Green Populism: A New Phenomenon*, by Ariana Carvalho that shows how 'green' agendas can be integrated into populist movements, cutting across all political spectrum, candidly pointing that "materialistic way of living" is leading to the "death and collapse of entire ecosystems" (Carvalho

2020, p. 48). Mapping the pros and cons of the trend, the study offers useful insights into the future course of the impending environmental politics, indicating that 'green populism' may not be a short-lived trend and may become a part of mainstream political debate. Yet, a note of caution that marks the study is about 'restrain' and 'validation of science' that needs to be applied for if green populism is applied for purely political gain rather than comprehensive environmental action, it will not be an empowering philosophy of future green politics (Carvalho 2020).

Green Politics or the politics of Green Populism is often criticised for promoting the assumptions of the dominant Western environmental paradigm at the cost of the global south. However, even if green politics is not green enough, it offers benefits in terms of 'publicity, access to information and ability to distribute information' (Knill 1991). Populism although conflated with the rise of political authoritarianism antagonistic to democratic environmental ethos, can be mobilized to channelize environmental movements from 'crisis to cure' (W. Davies 2019). *Environmental Populism*, a work by Mark Beeson examines the challenges of aligning populist sentiment for effective environmental governance. The study argues that while there is an underlying distrust of the populist leaders who pick up the cause of environment, 'green populism' can generate grassroots momentum to address ecological crises. Instead of doing away with the populist approach due to scepticism of undermining environmental solutions, he calls for an inclusive and scientifically informed approach. He asserts 'Environmental populism might not be quite as mad as it sounds' (Beeson 2019, p. xv).

Conclusion

The target of 'net zero emissions' seem to further slowdown in case mainstream parties choose to ignore the 'green issues' as is clear by the elimination of the 'nations carbon pricing' by Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott or America's exit from Paris climate deal under the second presidency of Donald Trump (Campanella and Lawrence 2024). The idea of *green populism* is to underline the ambivalence that environmental issues face today, and to bring them to the forefront of political discourses of development and security. The fact that despite the unprecedented heatwaves, floods, wildfires, rising global temperatures that are triggering extreme weather events, there seem to be no 'urgency', 'emergent meetings' or a 'public call of caution' from the governments across nations - necessitates a 'wake-up call' from different platforms. Today, global political leadership is busy with war strategies to either 'alter' or 'maintain' the power equations, parting the 'climate crisis' out of the priority zones. Not only the political leadership, institutions and civil societies but the academic circles and scientific community take a passive posture towards issue concerning environment. This raises the question – after all who will take up the cause of environment?

The slogan of environmental restoration - 'think globally, act locally'- requires a psychological feat of crossing the threshold from 'denial & despair' to 'Hope' by changing the focus of the environmental movement from narratives of loss and desolation to populism of green restorations at the individual and community level (Woodworth 2013, p. 435). Protection is best affected by 'conserving', which in turn is best achieved by an attitude of 'respect' and 'reverence' for the one who sustains. This is the reason that the

notion of 'Dharma' is at the foundation of all Hindu philosophies, so also the protection of nature. Seeking viable green solutions today is not an indulgence, rather a mandate for a safe future of mankind. Living in Delhi and the surrounding areas today is like smoking twenty-five cigarettes every day, yet the 'pollution' was missing from the political campaign and commitments of 2025 Delhi Assembly elections. The governments across-countries, neither have the intention nor the wherewithal to take up the task, reflected again at the COP 29 at Baku, Azerbaijan. It has to be proactively taken-up by the civil society, in order to avoid its politicisation at the hands of populist leaders seeking only partisan's political interest. Plato's prophesy that if 'one of the penalties of refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors' stands analogous to the environmental issues. Given the fact that these issues are not acquiring centrality at political discourses even today, the 6th mass extinction of human race may occur before its natural course. The disjoint between populism and the environment, devising the binary of masses and elites transcending the political spectrums contains the risk of risking the fragile environmental moment. The relative triumph of populism beyond politics like Chipko and Apiko moments, Gilets Jaques, Friday for Future, Extinction Rebellion, Climate Justice, etc counterbalance the elite's populism. As mentioned by the Claire L. Parkinson 'It hardly matters to the Earth exactly where sea level is; but to humans, who cannot readily live underwater, a few meters rise in sea level can matter a great deal' (Parkinson 2010, p. 325). Green Populism may seem a populist resort, but in the absence of any hope of a concrete action of conservation – this may be the only promise for envisioning a sustainable future in an interconnected but geopolitically and philosophically fragmented societies.

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