Global Warming in an Unequal World: A Case of Environmental Colonialism

The idea that developing countries like India and China mustshare the blame for heating up the Earth and destabilizing its climate—as espoused in a recent study published in the United States by the World Resources Institute in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Program—is an excellent example of environmental colonialism. India and China may account for more than one-third of the world’s population, but are these two nations really responsible for flushing one-third of the muck and dirt into the world’s air and oceans?

The report of the World Resources Institute (WRI), a Washington-based private research group, is based less on science than politically motivated mathematics. Its main intention seems to be to blame developing countries for global warming and to perpetuate the current global inequity in the use of the Earth’s environment and its resources.

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 produce most of the carbon dioxide—the main agents of global warming. In recent years, however, Western nations have been carrying out a sustained propaganda campaign alleging that deforestation in developing countries, and the generation of methane through irrigated rice farming and the raising of cattle, is also contributing to global warming. This has shifted the onus onto developing countries.

Recently, the World Resources Institute and the United Nations Environment Program released the annual report, *World Resources 1990–91*, that stated for the first time that India, China and Brazil are among the top five countries responsible for the accumulation of these gases in the Earth’s atmosphere.

**Cooking the Figures**

The figures used by the WRI to calculate the quantity of carbon dioxide and methane produced by each country are extremely questionable. Heavy emphasis has been placed on comparisons of carbon dioxide produced by deforestation and methane generated by rice fields and livestock to carbon dioxide produced by burning fossil fuels like oil and coal—an emphasis that tends to underplay the impact of the developed countries.

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 water buffalo and rice fields of subsistence farmers in West Bengal or Thailand? Do these people not have a right to live? No effort has been made to separate the "survival emissions" of the poor, from the "luxury emissions" of the rich.

**Old Numbers; New Recipe**

A study conducted by India’s Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), which uses WRI’s data for each country’s gaseous emissions, concludes that developing countries are responsible for only 16 percent of the carbon dioxide accumulating in the Earth's atmosphere. The WRI report claims a Third World share of 48 percent. Similarly, developing countries were not found to be responsible for any excess methane accumulation, although WRI claims a Third World share of 56 percent.

This difference is explained by a simple fact: 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 a fair and equitable basis. Since most of the cleansing is done by the oceans and troposphere, the Earth has to be treated as a common heritage of mankind. 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, CSE has apportioned the world’s restoration ability to each country in proportion to its share of the world’s population. Thus India, with 16 percent of the world’s population, gets 16 percent of the Earth’s natural air and ocean “sinks” for carbon dioxide and methane absorp-
EMissions

...pollution is the key to our struggle to protect the world’s climate. It is the key to protecting our future. It is the key to protecting the health and safety of our children. It is the key to protecting the environment.

The WMIDNEP study, published in 2015, highlights that the current emissions levels are far too high. The study estimates that, if current trends continue, the world will reach its limit of 4°C of global warming by 2030. This would lead to catastrophic consequences for the environment, economy, and human health.

The WMIDNEP report also highlights the need for immediate action. It calls for a global agreement to reduce emissions by 2030, with a target of zero emissions by 2050. The report notes that this is necessary to avoid the worst consequences of climate change.

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