



Climate Justice and Planning

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Abstract:

Responses to global emergencies like climate change and pandemics must have justice at their core because the poor and powerless suffer more than the privileged and entitled. The responses towards the COVID-19 pandemic help us rethink the old normal, imagine the new normal and address possibilities and scenarios from a vulnerability and justice point of view.

While we await to unravel how the pandemic and climate change interface, this research paper discusses the importance of climate justice in coastal landscapes in India. It first illustrates how sea-level rise – a risk associated with climate change is inherently disproportional under contemporary social structures. It then details how flooding and pollution doubles the impact of the risk. We argue that climate justice branched out from social and environmental justice, is an important framework to address these disproportionate risks to ensure a just and healthy society.

The COVID-19 situation acts as an additional health stressor in already climatically compromised geographies. It also forewarns us that lockdowns may reduce pollution load over cities, but overall carbon emission continues unabated due to energy needs. Emission reduction targets remain unchanged, and not reducing emissions has implications on environment and justice.

Keywords:

Climate Justice, Climate Change, Coastal Landscapes, Pollution, Carbon, Energy

Sea-level rise and disproportional distribution of risk:

Global sea-level rise (SLR), up to one meter by 2100, is a widely accepted fact among the scientific community. Various physical changes associated with SLR such as inundation, saltwater intrusion and erosion can occur unexpectedly when the threshold is crossed. Marginalised coastal communities are poor and disproportionately vulnerable to risks associated with SLR. SLR related increase in tidal activity threatens their autonomy, well-being and property. The extent of SLR vulnerability in any given coastal region depends on multiple criteria- the terrain and climate conditions, population density, area and proportion of the region inundated, economic conditions and the prevailing political scenario.

Impact of Climate Change in India:

Vulnerability is intersectional, impacted by multiple environmental, social and economic stressors and changes. For instance, while facing extreme climatic events such as torrential rain followed by flooding and drought, people, usually working classes with marginalized caste identities will also be affected by diseases, poverty, and ailments due to pollution. These issues will lead to highly complicated political and moral challenges like displacement and land conflicts that extend beyond the coastlines.

Since the contribution to climate change by the afflicted community is relatively low, their suffering raises ethical and moral considerations. Are the 'goods' and 'bads' of physical events such as global warming equally distributed? Are there proper climate governance mechanisms sensitive to differentiated responsibility and risks, mitigated justly for suffering marginalised communities?

**Flood and pollution in the seashore - doubling the risk:**

Authorities treat flooding, a distinct form of environmental risk, as natural disaster and appear absolved of any role or responsibility. However, recent studies point to social risks associated with floods to which certain groups are highly vulnerable. In south India particularly, flooding has not been considered an environmental justice issue, involving unequal risk exposure. For an environmental aware society, Kerala has ignored disproportionate risks from flooding in its public and academic discourse. Thinking about justice around flooding due to climate change is of social and policy significance in the state.

Pollution is an additional stressor along with floods, and together with SLR the risk doubles for communities living along coastlines. They are not only vulnerable to the high water level and prolonged inundation due to extreme physical events, but also the pollution from the city and industries.

Eloor, a panchayat in peri-urban Kochi, is a known toxic hotspot. About 200 odd industries on the banks of Periyar River in Ernakulam district pollute air and water in the area. The river is being polluted by the effluents from these industries, affecting the health of people living and working in the area. In the recent floods in 2018 and 2019, many activists claimed that hazardous chemicals stored in the companies such as Indian Rare Earth Limited (IRE), The Travancore Cochin Chemicals (TCC) and Hindustan Insecticides Limited (HIL) had been washed away by the floods which caused serious problems for human and non-human beings in the area.

Climate change also affects temperature and precipitation patterns. High-intensity short-duration rainfall, and a combination of high tide and SLR increase the magnitude of devastation in the coastal zones, as witnessed in peri-urban Kochi during the 2018 and 2019 floods.

Climate risk vulnerability and justice:

Climate change makes population, and weaker demographics within, vulnerable to economic and health risks. Various coordinates or 'locations' such as socioeconomic (poverty, caste and gender), demographic (weak and ageing vote banks), geographic (coastal/tidal) and personal (disability) intersect to make people vulnerable to climate change-induced consequences. These consequences and risks will continue to concentrate on low-income groups residing along the coastlines. These areas have a high prevalence of climate-sensitive diseases such as malaria, diarrhea and malnutrition.

Environmental Justice encompasses a framework to analyse climate-related problems. This framework initially emerged in the US context, questioning race, ethnicity and their relationship dealing with burdens of environmental pollution and risk associated with technological advancement. The idea of climate justice later emerged from the environmental justice discourse.

Two important aspects of climate justice include procedural justice and distributive justice. Procedural justice ensures democratic decision making that include the voice of all those who are affected by climate change. Kerala has an excellent procedural justice record, thanks to its strong local governance institutions. Distributive justice ensures the costs and benefits of addressing the challenge of climate change are distributed equally and fairly based on responsibility and ability.

Kerala has political leeway to disaggregate climate change impacts and include distributive justice in its policies. However, nationally, current institutional mechanisms or governance structures are insufficient of addressing the problems of climate-vulnerable societies and ensure justice. The state in general, "refuses to accept liabilities for the environmental consequences of its destructive economy." For instance, post-2018 flood, inhabitants in Eloor were at the risk of severe pollution due to the density of chemical companies in the area. The local community demanded studies on the



presence of hazardous chemicals in the water and land. However, the government has not initiated any study to ameliorate their concerns.

Conclusion:

The current global pandemic offers both a 'disruptive' and 'reflective' opportunity for research and policy work around climate risk and justice. As India's seashores are facing SLR and floods, the disproportionate distribution of climate risk needs to be explored. We urge researchers, activists and policy experts to come together in an interdisciplinary spirit and pay attention to the existing patterns and intersections of social and spatial inequalities.

Incorporating justice question in the climate crisis will help create a better future for generations to come and equip the society better to handle environmental risks including pandemics and climate change.

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