



Original Article

Understanding Climate Change from a Subaltern Perspective

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Abstract

This paper is built on the discourse of Climate Justice. It provides an Indian context to the Global narrative that developing countries are more vulnerable to the climate crisis than developed countries. And it is the Indigenous population from the developing countries that can offer substantial solutions to the crisis. Theoretically, often termed the subaltern approach. Keeping this at the centre, the paper urges that the marginalised groups in India, Dalits and Adivasis, are particularly vulnerable to the climate change crisis due to a combination of reasons- financial, geographical, socio-economic, and political. Despite making the least contribution to the development of the crisis itself. They lack access to the resources and the developmental technologies to extract benefits from nature. The paper further explains that having a cultural understanding of climate change is essential in mitigating it. Organic adaptation strategies by the marginalised people who live closer to the earth are of great importance. The neglect of the perspective of these groups will only make literature on the environment more exclusive and unfair. However, consideration of their perspective will help build holistic climate-related policies.

Keywords: Subaltern, Climate Justice, Marginalisation, Dalit, Adivasis.

Introduction

Climate Change has been one of the rising issues that concerns the Global Community. As climate-related disasters have become frequent, their impact has ceased to be limited to environmental decline and expanded to economic, social, and political spheres. Adequate literature is available addressing the North-South divide at the Global level, which emphasises the exploitation of developing countries by the developed countries through the colonisation of the atmosphere. The Global North and Global South Climate Discourse have redounded in the conceptualisation of 'Climate Justice'. As suggested by scholars, Climate Justice signifies that social, cultural, economic, and political aspects should be considered when studying climate change, and without this interdisciplinary approach, mitigating Climate extremity is unattainable. The Climate Justice frame is pivotal in understanding some of the veritably important questions: Does everyone share equal responsibility in minimising and mitigating the climate crisis? Does it affect everyone proportionally and in a fair manner? Who gets barred from the climate change process? Are the climate change programs inclusive? According to Climate Justice Scholars, Climate Change is a moral and justice concern, not only an economic and scientific one. (Clark & Gunaratnam, 2019; Gardiner, 2014).

Dr. Sultana (2022) suggests that Climate Justice is about paying attention to how climate change impacts people- differently, unevenly, and disproportionately, as well as readdressing the resultant injustices in fair and equitable ways. Thus, Climate Justice substantially comprises the social justice aspect of the environmental problem. This framework has been significantly used in a transnational setup. Climate Justice Scholarship has largely discussed and debated how developing countries have been unfairly criticised for climate change despite being at the receiving end of exploitation and oppression. Agarwal & Narain (2019), in their scholarly work 'Global Warming in an Unstable World: A Case of Environmental Colonialism' explain that- Climate Justice is historically and spatially produced. These have disproportionately burdened racialised post-colonial communities and countries of the Global South, and hence, an ethical and equitable intervention is essential to bring about a justice-oriented approach to the Climate Change discourse. Inferring from this discourse, the paper attempts to reframe the climate change debates in India with perspectives from the marginalised groups, primarily the Dalits and the Adivasis. Dalits and tribals are inextricably associated with nature and are reliant on it. (Singh, 2023) Due to geographical propinquity, they are the ones who are disproportionately affected by natural disasters. While they are least responsible for creating the problem, as they've no access to the resources or the capital to derive the benefit from it.

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Their lived experience elucidates how social exploitation has fostered environmental exploitation.

Literature on marginalised communities' life and culture reflects the historical colonialization of natural resources by the elite upper castes. Smita Jha and Riya Mukherjee (2016), in their paper "Live Simply that all may Simply Live: Rethinking the Environmental Paradigms through Select Dalit Autobiographies" while drawing from the works of Malagatti and Kamble, have remarked that just like the social setup, nature was also casteised by the upper castes. Because wherever nature was present, it was supposed to be a resource pool of the upper castes, and hence, Dalits were barred from adequately using nature.¹ Similarly, the tribal communities are alienated from their land and forest for fuel extraction, coal mining, and other developmental purposes by both state and non-state actors, which mainly comprises social and political elites of the country. This colonialization of the environment has resulted in the displacement and devastation of the livelihood of tribal groups.

Conceptualizing the Subalterns of India

The notion of the subaltern was first referred to by the Italian Marxist political activist Antonio Gramsci in his article "Notes on Italian History," which appeared later on as part of his most widely known book, Prison Notebooks, written between 1929 and 1935 (Louai, 2011). Subalterns in Gramsci's view were the workers and peasants of Italy at that time who suffered at the hands of the Fascist regime headed by Mussolini. These people or groups of people were referred to as 'low ranks' in the societal order and were put under the hegemonic rule of social elites. Their culture, ideas, and practices were systematically neglected to establish ideological and cultural dominance over them. The concept of subalternity has been used by several post-colonial studies scholars to contextualise the marginalised groups of their countries. In India, the term 'subaltern' was received by historians who attempted to contextualise the concept in Colonial India. According to the Scholarship, the popular version of India's history is dominated by the British Elites, whereas the subaltern version of history has been pushed to the margins. Subalterns in this context referred to the colonised people of India. The scholars further emphasised Imperial 'history from below'. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2020) notes that subaltern studies emerged out of "anti-colonial" thought rather than "postcolonial" thought.²

However, the reception of Gramsci in India has been criticised by anti-caste scholars. For instance, Cosimo Zene (2013) in his work, "The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B.R. Ambedkar: Itineraries of Dalits and Subalterns" criticised the reception of Gramsci in India, by stating that Gramsci and his concept of subalternity cannot be studied without taking into consideration the 'Dalit Question'. He says the position of the Untouchables/Dalits in South Asian societies largely reflects the historical, social, and cultural characteristics of subalterns as described by Gramsci. Zene felt that '...the influence of Gramsci's thought in South Asia, though inspiring to the Subaltern Studies project, had not reached its full potential, precisely because it lacked the contribution of a substantial local reflection, such as the one provided by Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders, as the best expression of mediated self-reflexive thinking on subalterns.' (Zene, 2013) Taking into consideration the arguments of Zene on the concept of 'subalternity', the paper argues that the histories of Dalits and the Tribal groups in India have been pushed to the margins. The Elite upper castes have altered the consciousness of these masses through cultural hegemony, making it difficult to retrace their original knowledge, culture, and history. These characteristics of subordination, suppression, and subjugation of these groups bear resemblance to the attributes of the subalterns in Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. Hence, the subaltern perspective in the paper refers to the perspectives of the Dalits and Adivasis of India. Their approach to the environmental crisis, its impact on them, as well as the adaptation and mitigation strategies applied by them through the Traditional Environmental Knowledge (TEK). (Johnson, 1992)

Differential Impact of Climate Change on Dalits and Tribals

The impact of Climate Change on Dalits and Adivasis is a critical area of study that needs a thorough understanding of the complex relationship between socio-cultural, economic and environmental factors. Dr B.R. Ambedkar first led the organised Dalit environmental struggle known as the Mahad Satyagraha in 1927. His works remain foundational to all anti-caste scholarship and, by extension, to theorising Dalit ecological experiences (Kumar 2020; Sharma 2017). He emphasised that the Brahmanical society has made caste an integral part of Indian society, including the environmental sphere. Indulata Prasad (2022), in her work 'Towards Dalit Ecologies' conceptualises the term "Dalit Ecologies" by articulating the lived environmental experiences of Dalits. According to the scholar, Dalit Ecologies is a critical framework for examining caste-based segregation, dispossession, dehumanisation, appropriation of Dalit labour, and Ecological knowledge. Dalit bodies, marked from birth as naturally impure, are racialised as being "darker" than those of privileged caste groups because they work closer to "nature" in outdoor jobs or in "polluting" forms of labour such as handling the dead and human bodily waste (Geetha 2009; Guru and Sarukkai 2017). Like eco-feminist literature, anti-caste scholars have focused on the implications of the unjust social order on the environmental experiences of the Dalits. The ecological experiences of Dalits are an intertwining of their social location and nature. For them, nature is casteised (Sharma, 2017) by the upper castes by normalising the ideas of purity, pollution, and exclusion. Their encounters with nature are filled with horror and disgust. Mukul Sharma (2017), in his work, "Caste and Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics", quoted poems from the memories of Dalit writers and poets. The following poem by a Dalit agricultural labourer explains their anguish towards nature.

Collecting wood in the forest

Wild animals accost us

The weather is against us!

Despite Dalits having high stakes in the environment owing to their dependence on nature (NCDHR, 2022), their struggles and challenges with the climate crisis are hardly documented and almost missing in the environmental literature. It is with the help of their life narratives that they have been able to keep a record of their engagement with nature. Regardless of them living close to nature, Dalits have been deprived of the ownership and accessibility of natural resources, whereas the burden of taking responsibility for their depletion is laid upon them without any second thought. While mainstream Environmental Scholars recognise the vulnerabilities of the Global South in Climate Change, they fail to recognise the systemic vulnerability of the erstwhile untouchables. The neglect of Dalits from the environmental discourse has been recognised by anti-caste scholars. For Instance, Gail Omvedt (1997), in her article, "Why Dalits dislike environmentalists", explains the reasons behind the

¹ <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/understanding-the-impact-of-climate-change-on-dalits-and-marginalised-communities-harder-news-297864>

² <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2020/02/17/subaltern-studies/>

³ Sharma, M. (2017). *Caste and Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics*. Oxford University Press India.

disengagement of Dalits in the contemporary environmental movement. She urges that it is primarily due to the schism in Dalit and Non-Dalit perspectives that the environmental movement has been disliked by the Dalits. The mainstream environmental movement is highly influenced by Gandhian thought that rural life, i.e. village settlements, is ideal for survival, and it keeps us closer to nature. However, for the Dalits, this runs contrary to Ambedkar's thought that villages are the den of casteism that naturalises an unequal social order that excludes Dalits from physical, social, and ecological spaces and interactions. (Prasad,2022) Kanch Ilaiah refers to secular environmentalism "as exclusive, devoid of any concerns and relationship with the builders of the environment" and argues that "it is not bothered about the nationalist and hegemonic social structure that Brahmanism has built." (Sharma,2017)

Furthermore, it is the Dalit women, particularly from the rural areas, who suffer double-fold in a climate change-induced disaster or crisis, as they are victims of multiple oppressions. Dutta, Sinha, and Parashar (2018), in their empirical study on Dalit women and water availability, examine that Dalits depend on the 'goodwill' of the dominant castes for their access to water, which renders them vulnerable to untouchability, discrimination, and physical and verbal abuse. And it is the Dalit women who go through the anguish daily, as the onus of household chores lies on them. They get abused by both dominant caste women and men. As per some prominent reports published in this regard, it has been observed that "In over 100 villages affected by drought in India, Dalit women are being denied access to water sources in 48.4% of villages because of segregation and untouchability practices. More than 20% of Dalits do not have access to safe drinking water." (Jha,2022)

Adivasis are referred to as the Indigenous people of India. International law defines indigenous people as 'distinct' cultural communities with unique land and other rights based on original and historical use and occupancy. (Elliott,2004) Abundant literature is available on the contribution of the Adivasis to India's Environmental Discourse. However, in practice, they remain among the vulnerable groups adversely affected by Climate Change. A study on the impacts of droughts induced by climate change on the Dalits and the Adivasis of the Marathwada region of Maharashtra by National Dalit Watch (Girija,2022) states that Dalits and Adivasis are subjected to caste-based violence while accessing public services during the climate-induced drought period.

Table: Types of Discrimination (Percentage)

	Untouchability	Labelled as Thieves	Excluded from Social events
SC	56	0	0
ST	48	17	1
Total	50	12	1

Source: Droughts, Dalits and Adivasis: A Study on the Impact of Droughts Catalyzed by Climate Change on the Dalits and the Adivasis of the Marathwada Region of Maharashtra, NCDHR (2022)

Although the given data is related to the study of a particular region of a State, it provides a blurred picture of the hardships the Adivasi community undergoes in order to access natural resources. Most of them get labelled as thieves and criminals by the dominant castes. The vulnerability is "due to their resource-based livelihoods and the location of their homes in vulnerable environments" (Kodirekkala,2018), and in India's case, the unique social hierarchical order, which excludes these communities from the mainstream population and settlements. However, these Indigenous groups have an adaptive capacity to deal with climate change. (Kodirekkala, 2018) This potential is endowed in the community's culture and tradition, which is built by accumulating knowledge from the ecosystem. Kancha Ilaiah Shephard, in most of his work on Dalits and Adivasis, has emphasised that these communities are 'productive communities' and their cultural as well as spiritual life comprises several aspects of nature. The culture of these subaltern groups is in harmony with nature; some of these groups worship nature as their deity and are conscious of the ecosystem, adaptation, and mitigation strategies in times of crisis. Likewise, Kodirekkala (2018) recognises the cultural dimension of climate change; the scholar suggests that the local communities are highly aware of their surroundings and thus have sustainable solutions to the climate change crisis drawn from their everyday life experiences. The author supports the approach of IPCC that non-technical adaptation strategies by the local and Indigenous populations are as important as the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. Furthermore, he states that the contribution of Indigenous groups at the international level has been studied and discussed; however, very little literature is available on the potential adaptation and mitigation strategies of the Indian local and Indigenous groups. He frames an example of the Konda Reddis⁴ of South India which has shifted from the cultivation of the *Jeelugu* palm plants to the *tati* palm plants due to the growing hot climate, induced by global warming. The TEK and conservation strategies of such groups can provide valuable support in the preservation of biodiversity, forest management, and advancing adaptability to the rising climate concern. Also, land and Jungle to *adivasis* are inextricably linked to, and governed by local cosmology. (Froerer,2012) Their deities are not in the temple but in the forest areas and thus preservation of such auspicious areas becomes crucial for these communities. Tribal communities have their own cultural ecology⁵ that is preserved through folklore and oral traditions (Sharma, 2012). The Brundtland Report suggested that indigenous lifestyles can offer modern societies many lessons on the management of resources in complex ecosystems because these communities are the repositories of vast accumulations of traditional knowledge and experience that link humanity with its ancient origins. Hence, their disappearance is a loss for the larger society (Elliott, 2004)

Research Methodology

This qualitative study has adopted a Critical Analysis Approach to examine secondary sources on Climate Change and Climate Justice discourse, particularly considering the Dalits and Adivasis in India. The study has reviewed existing literature on the topic from a critical investigative point of view. Materials like articles, books, policy documents and case studies have been

⁴ Kodirekkala, K.R. Cultural adaptation to climate change among indigenous people of South India. *Climatic Change* 147, 299–312 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-017-2116-8>

⁵ Cultural Ecology interprets cultural practices in terms of their long-term role in helping humans adapt to their environment (Kottak,2009)

studied to understand how power dynamics and marginalisation work in Climate Change. The study is guided by a justice-oriented approach to Climate Change.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to achieve the following Objectives-

- 1) To reframe existing discourse on Climate Change by focusing on the Traditional Ecological Knowledge of the Dalits and Adivasis
- 2) Contribute to the existing literature on Climate Change
- 3) To provide a nuanced understanding of Climate Change and Environmental justice

Conclusion

Climate Change literature in India is not caste-sensitive; it does not take into consideration the disproportional effect of the climate crisis on the communities, which are already victims of oppression. In this context, the paper urges that the mainstream climate change literature in India must be re-visited and reframed to address the systemic injustice in India that perpetuates environmental injustice and responsibility should be added on the part of the elite upper caste groups by making a paradigm shift in approach by concluding for a bottom-to-top approach where they lived experiences and Traditional Environmental Knowledge of the subaltern groups should be put to the center to form a substantial solution to the Climate Crisis.

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