



Environmental challenges in China: Implications and Prospects

Speaker: Ravi P. Bhatia

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Presentation:

Both India and China are facing grave challenges in the form environmental degradation. India whose crisis is less apparent than that of China can hope to learn from their experience and avoid treading the same path. The Presentation made by Prof. Ravi mainly focused on general understanding of the environmental threat spectrum China is facing and the similar daunting challenges that India could face in future. The presenter however acknowledged the limitation of his study because he could not refer to Chinese language material on the issue and therefore his study was based only on English language literature available with him.

The presentation started with the image of smog engulfed city immediately conveying the sense and the scale of air pollution in the megacities of China. Facts and figures showing similar scale of water pollution and soil pollution were also presented as evidence of the growing pollution levels in China.

A major point that came out of the discussion was that pollution was unfortunately commensurate with the burgeoning population and growing manufacturing capabilities. This startling proportional rise in pollution with the growth in GDP gives rise to the *development versus environment* debate which ideally should not have been contradictory or even a debate.

The speaker also elaborated on the wide implications of climate change, the rise in suspended particulate matter in the air and the repercussions on public health in the form of rising cases of lung diseases etc. and consequent pre-mature deaths in China. One problem very peculiar to China is the problem related to garbage disposal and specially management of radioactive, chemical and electronic waste that is being generated in humongous quantities in China because it engages in a lot reprocessing of electronic waste and secondly because it is the manufacturing hub for the whole world. With a

burgeoning population it is the manufacturing sector that absorbs the majority of the work force and therefore any endeavor to curb or impose tax penalties on polluting industries has political implications and hence difficult to carry through. The Kuznet's curve also discussed as an addendum to the presentation which relates inequality and development in a country over the period of a country's transformation from an underdeveloped to developing and finally to a developed economy. The Kuznet's curve has the trajectory of an inverted 'U' shape when a graph is plotted with inequality on the x axis and development on the y axis. The speaker posited that similar to inequality the pollution levels in a country also follow the Kuznet's curve when plotted against development.

On being questioned on how China was fairing on the Kuznet's curve the speaker responded that around 2005-2006 China had started exhibiting signs of turnaround by going past the peak on the Kuznet's curve in case of certain pollutant gases. On being further questioned as to what explained 2005-2006 the speaker succinctly mentioned that there was a paradigm shift in policy making, an intensifying environmental consciousness and a greater emphasis on use and procurement of 'green technology' that could be attributed for the turn around.

One of the participants asked the speaker about his personal opinion on the use of nuclear energy to which he responded by saying that many countries are phasing out nuclear energy from their energy mix in favor of other renewable sources. He went on to add that while nuclear accidents may not occur very frequently but when they do they have deleterious consequences and that nuclear energy costs are highly prohibitive. However some participants expressed their reservation on this argument and also on whether some of the renewable sources of energy mentioned before like solar energy were truly 'environment friendly' as espoused by the speaker and that he failed to mention some of the other issues involved in the use of solar or wind energy like land acquisition, mining of silicon, lifecycle costs etc.

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