



ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN CHINA: PEOPLE'S AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION

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The issue of environmental protection has remained prominent within the Chinese state vocabulary ever since the disastrous effects of political campaigns under Mao- especially, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution- began manifesting itself in the form of greater land degradation, depletion of natural resources, denuding of forests, etc. The ill- conceived schemes of backyard furnaces, 'wipe out the four pests', 'take grain as the key link' 'learning from Dazhai' etc. embarked China on an environmental abyss. "Mao's war against nature" (to borrow the term used by Judith Shapiro) since then has become an Achilles' heel for Chinese policy makers, its legacy forming the source for major policy decisions on environment and economy until today. Although delayed, the recognition of the significance of environmental protection, when the government released its first White Paper on environmental protection in 1996, cites the importance of public participation in environmental protection. Subsequent government initiatives, as a result, are precisely targeted at educating and sensitising the masses about the importance of environmental protection, and their role as its stakeholders. Is environmental participation in China an entirely government- led process or is it characteristic of a 'participatory environmental protection' process? If so, what is the nature of this 'participatory' process? How is it different from the government initiatives or how is it associated to the governmental measures? How much autonomy do the public initiatives enjoy in their functioning? These were the few questions addressed by the speaker in this presentation titled, "Environmental Protection in China: People's Awareness and Participation".

The presentation dwelt on two aspects of environmental protection- one, people's awareness of the environmental issues and two, their participation in environmental protection. It began with the sketching of a broad picture of how in recent years public participation in environment-related issues has been expanding as seen through a significant rise in the number of public complaints and the individual visits to the Environmental Protection Boards (EPBs). Public protests against industries violating environmental norms have also surged- the recent protests against the establishment of PX chemical plant in Xiamen and the Zhongguo Huatian electricity project in Yunnan creating massive media uproar. While he explained the expanding public participation in environmental issues as a manifestation of the heightening environmental consciousness and awareness amongst the masses, he states that this process was undergirded by an enhanced role of media and civil society in generating environmental consciousness within the masses.

The second section of the presentation thus focused on the role played by media and civil society in cultivating awareness amongst the people and guiding public participation. A statistical study of major newspaper articles and reports in China showed a general increase in the number of reports and articles related to environmental issues from 2003- 2009, with the provincial newspapers in East China (constituting some of the most polluted provinces) generating the maximum number of articles related to environmental protection. This was accompanied by cases of investigative journalism wherein corrupt practices in industrial projects and violations of environmental norms were brought into light. Initiatives by civil society included initiatives like the Green Book of Environment, published annually by an ENGO, Friends of Nature, which includes articles by academics and activists on the environmental situation in China. Another initiative which brought the masses into its ambit was the PM 2.5 campaign, an initiative of Green Beagle in 2011, which distributed hand held machine to individuals to capture household air for particulate matter. Protest, as an element of participation, was another aspect highlighted during the presentation, with examples of public protest cited in several cases like the Zhongguo Huatian protest, the Xiamen PX plant protest etc. where people participated in large numbers. In the latter case, protest was also demonstrated through the online voting system, where people voted against the construction of the plant at Xiamen. As a result, public participation took place at three levels of decision making: one, before decisions are made, ie, the stage of environmental

assessment; two, during decision making, when laws are being made; three, after decision making, through complaints and protests. According to the speaker, public participation ensured checks and balances were placed on the government from green signaling environmentally hazardous projects as well as on the polluting companies that flagged such projects. The presentation thus encapsulated the growing awareness and public participation on issues related to environment and the role of various actors in developing environmental consciousness within the masses. It further demonstrated the interaction between state, environment and people and the complex negotiations between them.

In the discussion that followed, several questions relating to the autonomous character of the facilitators of public participation- media and civil society- emerged. The issues revolved around the space these organizations, individual activists, scholars etc. have in voicing their protests, to register a new ENGO etc. Questions on spatiality of protests, especially regarding designated places of protests, such as offices and the nature of protests were prominent, where enquiries sought to find any clear distinction made by the protesters between Chinese and foreign companies. How the government response to these protests took cognizance of its impact on other kinds of protests like the labour protests and the land- grab protests was another question raised during the discussion. What emerged towards the end was a picture of the Chinese environment scene, where several institutions were in place to ensure public participation, but still faced bottlenecks in the form of lack of transparency in handling disputes, lack of access to information from the companies, etc., indicating a need for further changes.

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