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SPECIAL SECTION: Ecological Distribution Conflicts in India

Editorial: Some Insights on the Role of Violence

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The term Ecological Distribution Conflicts (EDCs) was coined about 20 years ago by ecological economists (Martinez-Alier and O'Connor 1996) to describe social conflicts born from the unfair access to natural resources and the unjust burdens of pollution. The ultimate cause of such conflicts is the growth and changes in the social metabolism (the flows of energy and materials) concomitant with economic growth. In political ecology, the terms socio-environmental conflict, environmental conflict or EDC are interchangeable. Despite the processes of technological change and 'ecological modernization', unfair ecological distribution appears to be inherent at different scales to world capitalism, defined by K. W. Kapp (1950) as a system of cost-shifting. In environmental neoclassical economics, the preferred terms are 'market failure' and 'externalities', a terminology that implies that such externalities could be valued in monetary terms and internalized into the price system. If we accept commensurability of values, then 'equivalent' eco-compensation mechanisms could be introduced. Instead, the environmental social sciences such as ecological economics and political ecology advocate the acceptance of different valuation languages to understand such conflicts and the need to take them into account.

While 'economic distribution conflicts' in political economy describes conflicts between capital and labour (profits vs. salaries), or conflicts on prices between sellers and buyers of commodities, or conflicts on the interest rate to be paid by debtors to creditors, the term EDC in ecological

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economics and political ecology stresses the idea that unequal or unfair distribution of environmental goods is not always coterminous with 'economic distribution' as, for instance, rents paid for by the tenant farmers to landlords, or the international terms of trade of the South American economy, or claims for higher wages from mining unions opposing company owners.

'Ecological distribution conflicts' is then a term for collective claims against environmental injustices. There are different valuation languages deployed in such conflicts, and economic compensation is only one of them. In such conflicts, incommensurable values come into play (Conde and Martinez-Alier 2016).

The three articles in this special section have some aspects in common. All three deal with EDCs in India and accept incommensurability of values. The methodology used in the articles is a mix of fieldwork and secondary literature review, along with insights from the EJAtlas (Temper et al 2015; Temper et al 2018). All three articles also attempt to look at the means, methods and manifestations of violence in EDCs in India.

The article by Arpita Bisht draws on her doctoral thesis and her previously published overview article on "ecological distribution conflicts over mineral extraction in India" (Bisht and Gerber 2017). In this previous work, she had focused mainly on metal mining. Here she focuses on another important element of the social metabolism of Indian economy- sand and gravel extraction for the construction industry and for other industries.

India has given some terms to the global vocabulary of environmental justice (Martinez-Alier et al 2016), and one of them is, in English, the term "sand mafia", used by activists and journalist. Apart from the ecological harm, as it endangers several species of flora and fauna and alters the patterns of access to river beds and beaches by local people, the striking facet of sand 'extractivism' in India is the violence associated with the activity.

Through comparative analysis of different instances of violence that arise, Bisht concludes that the sand mafia was born from the nexus between local politicians and extractive agents, as well as from the high profits which miners make from illegal activities which create unequal power dynamics. This economic activity leads to violence against a broad range of social actors from activists to police officers to peasant leaders, and involves verbal and physical harassment and several cases of murder of people trying to stop the activity. Power determines which valuation languages predominate – money triumphs in this case (illegally gotten money) over environmental and livelihood values.

The second article in this section is by Eleonora Fanari. An Italian by birth, she had spent more than five years in India, during which time she was also learning and working with the environmental organization Kalpavriksh in Pune. She has travelled in pursuit of her research interest in what we call in the EJAtlas "biodiversity conservation conflicts". By this we mean conflicts arising between conservationist organizations and the local people, of which sadly there are many examples in India (as also in Africa and other world regions). In her article, Fanari notices how conflicts due to biodiversity conservation projects have been growing elsewhere in the world as well as in India. There can be a confluence of conservation and local interests and values (as in the case of the conflict on Silent Valley in Kerala some decades ago) but often environmental protection is implemented at the expense of indigenous communities living within and around such biodiversity spots, which in India are sometimes Tiger Reserves. The study analyses the violent process of relocation and displacement from some of the best-known protected areas of India, and examines the laws and regulations that legalize the relocation of communities from their ancestral land, in contrast with the legal recognition of community's forest rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

The third article, by Brototi Roy and Joan Martinez-Alier, also deals with violence in some EDC s in India. The subject is enormous. Their source is mainly the EJAtlas (which held nearly 300 cases from India in December 2018 in a total of 2660 cases worldwide). From the many cases of environmental conflict included in this and other inventories (Roy, 2018), they select only a few in Odisha and Tamil Nadu for examining "extreme violence against environmental defenders" (a variable for which India appears to score at the world average) to other forms of violence: structural, cultural and ecological. The authors draw on work by Grettel Navas *et al.* (2018) on violence in environmental conflicts in Central America, and use the notion of slow or silent violence in protracted conflicts that have to do with deteriorating human health because of pollution (as from use of Endosulfan in Kerala, or sulphur dioxide from copper smelting in Thoothukudi in Tamil Nadu, or in Patancheru near Hyderabad – all of them are present in the EJAtlas), comparing it with cultural and structural violence in cases of dispossession of Adivasi population. The article concludes by asking for increased south-south collaboration in academic-activist co-produced research on environmental justice movements, research that would throw light on the realities of violence, which sometimes escape the lens of ecological economics and political ecology.

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