

## Understanding South Asian Vulnerability: Perspectives of Regional Security

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### Abstract

The development paths followed by South Asian countries are based increasingly on industrialization in urban areas. The aim of this paper is to review how environmental crisis in the rural context is linked critically to the sustainability of livelihood systems. The rural poor face an increasing challenge to meet their basic needs, the most basic of which is food security. Attempts to find solutions need to seriously consider both the class and gender dimensions of the problem. The study aims to analyze how the most environmental policy in South Asia engage little with the issue of gender inequality and how this might impinge on the welfare, efficiency, and sustainability of environmental management. The liberation of women and nature is seen as intimately linked. Within poor households, women's dependence on non-privatized natural resources is high and they are the most affected by the ill-effects of environmental decline. If sustainable development is to be achieved, the planning must address the serious imbalances between urban and rural areas as the unequal distribution of development deprives the rural population of general well-being. Ecofeminism calls upon women and men to reconceptualize themselves, and their relationship to one another and to the nature.

**Keywords:** Rural; South Asia; Women; Environment; Sustainable development

### Introduction

There is a proverb "If you plan for one year, plant rice, if you plan for 10 years, plant trees and if you plan for 100 years, educate people." South Asia's growing political and economic influence, as well as the dynamism of this rapidly changing region, demands careful research. The South Asian region comprising of eight independent nation-states: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Afghanistan, is predominantly rural (70 percent), populous (one-fifth of all humanity), poor (40 percent of world's poor), marked by its inequalities on the basis of caste, religion, ethnicities and further complicated by gender based inequalities. This paper aims to explore the issues raised by an integrated study of the different aspects of rural transformation in South Asia in the recent period. These aspects are changes in poverty, gender inequality, and environmental degradation. Recent trends in these sectors and processes are reviewed and a study is made of the interrelationships between them, highlighting the implication for development strategy and policy in the context of the ongoing economic reforms in South Asia.

The linkages between poverty and the environment are complex. These are strongly influenced by local demographic, institutional and cultural factors. Poverty, in both absolute (deprivation of basic human needs) and relative (economic inequality in the location) terms, has increased dramatically over the years and is often

associated with environmental degradation. The environment has been degraded as the result of high population densities and the increasing demands for natural resources, reinforced by world markets and the demand for national development. The region's governing regimes do not give a high priority to environmental problems. In fact, there is much controversy surrounding the poverty-environmental degradation nexus. It has been estimated that roughly half the world's poor live in environments that are highly degraded. This has led many observers to postulate a causal link between poverty and environmental degradation. The increasing deterioration of the earth's environment is having an impact on all of its inhabitants. For women worldwide, however, it has a particular significance. Efforts to reduce poverty and inequality must consider gender differences. The paper focuses on women's roles as users, producers and managers of the earth's resources and shows how environmental degradation affects women's health and basic needs. It also reveals how women can be a major force for environmental change, through their important roles as educators and communicators. Moreover, there is much evidence that gender equality and empowerment of women has positive effects on a variety of other important aspects of development.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the most broadly supported, comprehensive and specific development goals

the world has ever agreed upon. These eight time-bound goals included goals and targets on income poverty, hunger, maternal and child mortality, disease, inadequate shelter, gender inequality, environmental degradation and the Global Partnership for Development. Adopted by world leaders in the year 2000 and set to be achieved by 2015, the MDGs were both global and local, tailored by each country to suit specific development needs. As the MDGs era came to a conclusion with the end of 2015, 2016 officially launched 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It was adopted by world leaders on 25 September 2015 at the United Nations in New York. The new Agenda calls on countries to begin efforts to achieve 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or Global Goals over the next 15 years. As the great progress has already been made, this paper is an attempt to document and analyze the poverty situation in South Asia.

### Insecurities in South Asia

South Asia, southern region of Asia, with states of different sizes and capabilities, is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual region. South Asia is a region with 22 percent of the global population, 2 percent of global GDP and 1.3 percent of world trade [1]. It is characterized by high levels of insecurity at the inter-state, intra-state, and human level. Insecurity is manifest in both traditional and non-traditional security problems. Most of the South Asian countries are entangled with the common problems of high prevalence of poverty, political instability and low level of economic growth, low literacy rate, widespread malnutrition, gender disparities and environmental degradation. Economic growth experienced by South Asian countries and its effects on poverty alleviations presents a depressing paradox. It is among the fastest growing regions in the world. But it is also home to the largest concentration of people living in poverty. The discrimination and deep-rooted gender bias exists in all sectors on the basis of caste, community, religious affiliation and class. Today, the state of the environment is of global concern. But the nature of environmental problems and their implications vary in different parts of the world. Most environmental writings and policy-makers in South Asia have not focused the issue of gender inequality and how this might impinge on the efficiency and sustainability of the environment. However, there is an occasional mention of women's role in the environmental projects. To explain what has caused and contributed to the perpetual insecurity and human suffering and environmental degradation in the region, this paper argues the problems are driven by different variables. The paper will outline the poverty level and the nature of interventions in environmental management in South Asia in recent years. It will also focus the failure of ecofeminism to effectively challenge gender bias and examine women's experience in environmental management in rural South Asia today. The conclusion will outline some of the processes necessary to initiate change in South Asian society. Based on different analysis and the conclusions drawn, the paper recommends specific policies for making the region secure and for developing the long lasting inter-state and intra-state cooperative mechanisms necessary for the perpetuation of that security.

### Poverty as a Challenge

Concept of poverty has changed in recent years. Economic growth and urbanization have transformed the South Asia region in the past two decades, yet poverty still remains a key development challenge. South Asia has experienced a long period of robust economic growth, averaging 6 percent a year over the past 20 years. Yet, South Asia is home to half of the world's absolute poor living on less than \$2.00 a day, and 35 percent of South Asians in urban areas currently live in slums. The region still has nearly 400 million poor people in a population of 1.42 billion. In absolute numbers, the people living under the poverty line are, on \$2 per day criterion, more than 80 percent of the population in India, Bangladesh and Nepal, 73.6 percent in Pakistan and 41.6 percent in Sri Lanka [2]. Such a large scale of poverty still persists despite a higher growth rate in recent years. According to South Asia regional indicators 2013-2014, GNI per capita was \$1,455 in 2013 and \$1,496 in 2014; GDP growth (annual %) was 6.5% in 2013 and 6.9% in 2014; in terms of Population, total (millions) 1,132.8 in 1990 and 1,744.1 in 2015. The urban poor are highly vulnerable due to high unemployment, insecure housing and tenure, inadequate access to water supply, sanitation, electricity, transport services, limited education and health care facilities. Poor urban women, especially those in socially excluded groups, suffer disproportionately more in these unhealthy, unsafe environments and have limited opportunities to meaningfully participate in the decision-making process or to engage in productive activities to improve their livelihoods and communities.

During the 1990s, all the countries of the South Asian region implemented some sort of structural adjustment and stabilization programmes. According to the World Bank, about 571 million people in the region survive on less than \$1.25 a day, and they make up more than 44 percent of the developing world's poor [3]. The percentage of people living on less than \$1.25 a day fell in South Asia from 61 percent to 36 percent between 1981 and 2008 [4]. The proportion of poor is lower now in South Asia than any time since 1981. Although, on the criteria of purchasing power parity (PPP) of US \$1 a day, the scale of poverty has come down from 51.3 percent to 31.3 percent in 2001, the challenges to overcome poverty are so enormous that the efforts being made to alleviate poverty are far from being practical. Poverty head count ratio at \$1.90 a day (2011 PPP) (% of population) 50.6% 1990 and 18.8% 2012.

The extent of poverty, as measured by the proportion of the population living below some country-specific poverty line, varies substantially among Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. With the exception of Pakistan, poverty declined in South Asia during the 1990s. However, the pace at which poverty declined was either slower than the pre-reform period or it failed to register a radical departure from the past. With the exception of Pakistan, the GDP growth rates were higher during 1990-98 as compared to those of the 1980s [1]. Deceleration in the GDP growth rates has been visible since 1997, which could be due to a variety of factors such as the Asian Financial Crisis, decline in the world demand, and failure to



adjust the criteria entailed by tariff reduction and rationalization. Inter-regional comparison across the countries depicts: Top position of Sri Lanka with 7 percent population poor on the basis of US \$ per day. India lies at the bottom with 44 percent poor in 1997. Bangladesh emerges to be second only to Sri Lanka [1]. Bangladesh is reducing poverty @1 percent per annum from 1990 and hopes to achieve Millennium Development Goal. Industrial development and to take agricultural land for the purpose is inevitable. But people in Bangladesh who will be evicted should have to be part and parcel of such economic development. According to the recent study jointly prepared by the Bank and the government of Afghanistan titled *Transition in Afghanistan: Looking Beyond 2014*, with population growth at 2.8 percent, Afghanistan needs strong economic growth to reduce poverty and improve development outcomes. A growth rate of 6 percent a year would be required to double Afghanistan's per capita GDP in about 22 years [5]. The Bank is committed to supporting Afghanistan's efforts to engender strong, inclusive economic growth, reduce poverty, create jobs, and fight corruption.

Neglect of social sectors for too long and ignoring poor, especially women, in economic development have resulted in higher rates of illiteracy and dismal health conditions in the countries of South Asia, except for Sri Lanka and Maldives. South Asia has the lowest female participation rate in the labor force. South Asia is the only region in the world that spends less than \$30 per person on healthcare. South Asia's share of undernourished people of the world is 40 percent (300 million). Similarly, in education the situation remains worse. The youth literacy rate in South Asia was 72 percent in 2003. It was 50 percent in Bangladesh, 53 percent in Bhutan, 76 percent in India, 99 percent in Maldives, 73 percent in Nepal, 64 percent in Pakistan and 95 percent in Sri Lanka. As on Human Development Index and health indicators, women are discriminated against on all parameters, including education and job opportunities. Poverty is increasingly concentrated in the regions that have been left behind in the course of an unequal development and growth.

Not only that the funds allocation for primary healthcare, education and poverty eradication are too scarce, as compared to the huge sums being spent on non-productive expenditure, they are also wasted through inefficient and corrupt practices. While South Asia spends one of the highest percentages of its revenues and GDP on defence, administration and security, it spends the least in the world on social sectors. Human security, food security, right to work, education, health and decent living are far from being addressed appropriately.

The structures of GDP growth, erosion of traditional means of living, mechanization of agriculture, over-crowding of cities, neglect of human resource development, illiteracy, lack of health services, discrimination against women and marginalized communities, unequal development, regional disparities, bad governance and corruption all have contributed to poverty. Growth in South Asia weakened to an estimated 5.4 percent in 2012 from 7.4 percent in 2011, mainly due to a sharp slowdown in India, where GDP growth was forecast to be 5.4 percent in the fiscal year ending in March

2013 [6]. Regional GDP was projected to grow by 5.7 percent in the 2013 calendar year, 6.4 percent in 2014, and 6.7 percent in 2015, driven by improvement in export demand, policy reforms in India, stronger investment activity, and normal agricultural production [7]. According to the findings of the Global Human Development Report (HDR) 2015, Sri Lanka has been placed at the 73rd rank with the HDI value of 0.757. In the previous year's report, it occupied the 74th place. Since the end of the civil war in 2009, the country's rank went up by five. The Maldives is ranked 104th. India and Bhutan fall under the category of medium human development countries and Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan come under the group of low human development countries. India is placed at 130th rank and Pakistan, 147th. As for the growth rate during 1990-2014, South Asia's figure was 1.38, the highest among all regions. Within the region of South Asia, Afghanistan tops the list with the value of 1.89 for 1990-2014 followed by Bangladesh (1.64), Nepal (1.49) and India (1.48). Sri Lanka's score was 0.83. The World Bank Group is a key development partner in South Asia to support the overarching goal of reducing poverty and boosting shared prosperity. It also provides a road map to accelerate growth and foster human development.

### The Long Road to Gender Equality in South Asia

Gender inequality remains a major barrier to human development. This section discusses the varied experiences in South Asia, to highlight the similarities shared by women across the seven countries in terms of their vulnerabilities and livelihood strategies in the context of structural economic reforms. Many South Asian countries exhibit considerable gender inequality in education, employment, and health outcomes. Women are governed by social values, customs and norms, subjugated to the power of the male heads of households that impose restrictions on their mobility, autonomy in terms of decision making, health, reproduction and so on. Girls and women in South Asia and China suffer from elevated mortality rates which have been referred to as the 'missing women' by Amartya Sen and others [8]. In addition, there are large discrepancies in education between the sexes in South Asia. Finally, employment opportunities and pay differ greatly by gender in most developing regions and some developed ones as well [9]. The gender-specific effects have been experienced, albeit in varying degrees, across South Asia. According to the UNDP Human Development Report 2005, the gender-related development index (GDI) value was 0.75 for Sri Lanka, 0.59 for India and 0.51 for Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan.

Women who hold more than 50 percent of total population is severely suffering from rampant gender based violence, and discrimination in education, nutrition, health and employment disrupting gender equality. The levels of economically active female population vary across the countries, with Pakistan recording the lowest rate, while Bangladesh, Maldives are among the countries with relatively higher rates. The percentage of female workers among total workers however, is lowest in Maldives and Pakistan [9]. A large number of women are either ill equipped or not in a position

to propel themselves out of their traditionally unsatisfactory socio-economic conditions. They are poor, uneducated and insufficiently trained. They are often absorbed in the struggle to sustain the family physically and emotionally. Oppression and atrocities on women are rampant. Patriarchy continues to be embedded in the social system in many parts of South Asia, denying a majority of women the choice to decide on how they live. Women rarely have an independent say in community issues. Female infanticide continues to be common. Domestic violence is also widespread and is also associated with dowry. Leaving a meager number of urban and suburban women, women are crying for social justice. Attempts to find solutions, therefore, need to seriously consider both the class and gender dimensions of the problem.

According to International Labour Organization, gender equality means that women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and for contributing to, and benefiting from, economic, social, cultural and political development [10]. Every country has set a target to attain the Millennium Development Goal and followed the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) for promoting women's empowerment and formal and informal equality in economic, social, and political sectors. Most of the South Asian countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives are signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women [11]. However, the quest of gender equality still remains far behind to be fulfilled.

If the trend of gender inequality index (GII) is analysed in the South Asian countries, though it is gradually decreasing, the scenario of gender disparities in all three dimensions can be depicted: reproductive health, empowerment, and labor market participation. Recent data show that GII of South Asian countries: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan lie above the 0.5 level (the more the GII, grater the gender inequalities) which is very high in comparison to Sweden that has only 0.075 of GII [12]. In the same way, the reproductive health indicators like maternal mortality ratio (MMR) and adolescent fertility rate are still above the expectation signifying the poor delivery of family planning and postnatal care services, higher prevalence of sexually transmitted infections and nutritional deficiency among pregnant women, and not adequately addressing the adolescent reproductive health issues.

The gender disparity in education is considered as the biggest hindrance in women empowerment. It has a direct impact on economic growth through lowering the average quality of human capital. The Gender status in education shows that there is unequal access of girls and women in education. The number of girls is just the half to the number of boys in case of attainment of secondary education in Nepal. So are the conditions of other South Asian countries with an exception of Sri Lanka where the health and education conditions are significantly improved. In the midst of such pessimism, (Constitutional Assembly Election 2008) small South Asian country like Nepal kindled a hope in women empowerment ensuring 33 percent of female participation in parliament [12]. Gender inequality in education prevents progress in reducing

fertility and child mortality rates, thereby compromising progress in South Asian countries. Thus, gender inequality in education and employment may reduce growth and development.

There is a considerable impact of gender inequality on economic growth. Economic growth is indirectly affected through the impact of gender inequality on investment and population growth. Economically, South Asian women have limited access to resources and rely on male for any type of financial decision. Male dependency on financial decision-making has reduced women outdoor income activities. Only 32.8 percent of Indian women are economically active [12]. But in case of Nepal, even though women are facing pay level disparity, their proportion in labor force participation is the highest with compared to other South Asian countries.

The inequality is surfaced when the society creates the differences between men and women empowering one group to the detriment of the other. Therefore, the factors for high gender inequality in this region are not other than gender wise discrimination in policies, administration, health services, employment, education and resource distribution. Moreover, gender wise social stigma, cultural taboos, customs, beliefs and values are perpetuating the condition more severe [13]. Family planning, for instance, is still considered as the responsibility of female. Similarly, boys get more opportunity for better school enrollment and more nutritious diet. In case of female children, parents are reluctant to opt for early marriage. For achieving economic growth, poverty reduction and social harmony, gender inequality is utterly unwarranted.

As compared to men, women are much less likely to have ownership or control rights over resources. Women struggle for land rights in South Asia. Historically, South Asian women have not been typified by women demanding independent land rights. Attaining gender equality in the distribution of productive resources will require a simultaneous struggle against ideological constructions of gender. In many countries, the state is developing responsibility for natural resource management i.e., extending responsibility to "communities" or local user groups. In the irrigation sector, evidence from South Asia shows that organizations often exclude women through membership rules and practices. Greater involvement of women can strengthen the effectiveness of local organizations. The importance of women's access to and control over resources such as land, water and trees has recently received attention in the literature [14]. In recent years there have been explicit moves to increase women's political participation. However, their power is restricted, as it is the men who wield all the authority. Their decisions are often over-ruled by the government machinery.

To make a positive change, basic infrastructure should be provided in every village and city. Providing safe drinking water supply and better sanitation directly improves the lives and health of women. An access to affordable cooking fuel reduces the need to travel long distances. Improved transport connecting villages and with towns can directly improve living conditions. It can also lead to access to a wider range of goods and services. Better provisions for public distribution services directly affect the lives of women.

There is a need to have women-friendly economic policies that can enhance their social and economic position and make them self-reliant. Addressing gender disparities should not be reduced to a means of ensuring the effectiveness of poverty reduction strategies.

Gender equality cannot be achieved with a single parameter. It is a continuous process that can be started with poverty reduction, policy reaffirmed, institutional strengthening and gender sensitization [13]. It is crucial to train and give real power to the women leaders so that they can catalyst change in their villages regarding women. Simply by increasing the literacy level among girls and women, promoting woman's labor participation and economic independency, and expanding the female reproductive health right can significantly reduce the long persist inequality in this region [15].

It can be concluded that gender inequality is abundant in South Asian countries. High poverty, low literacy rate among female, gender biased belief and practices, and patriarchal social system remain the major constrains for the equality. The process of gender equality and women's empowerment still has a long way to go. Nevertheless, equal access to education, health and employment can assure the women empowerment and gender equality in the long run. Gender equality is a development objective in its own right, and sustainable development must aim to foster women's empowerment and effective participation. This implies involving women and men as partners and allies. In the development of women, empowerment is a major step. Efforts should be directed towards all round development of each and every section of women by giving them their due share.

### Causes and Consequences of Environmental Degradation

"Environmental trends are alarming and previous institutional and policy approaches appear to have had a limited success," said J. Warren Evans, Manager, Environment Division, Asian Development Bank. "Even in the face of this devastation, the region still has the opportunity to follow a different economic-environmental pathway, one that builds a clear urban-industry economy and ensures sustainability of natural resources" [16].

The landmark report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, entitled "Our Common Future", warned that unless we change many of our lifestyle patterns, the world will face unacceptable levels of environmental damage and human suffering (Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future). The Commission said that: "Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable and to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" [17].

The environmental crisis affects everyone on the planet. The degree to which the inhabitants of different parts of the world contribute to this crisis depends on the level of their economic development. Around 70 percent of the world's consumption of fossil fuel and 85 percent of chemical products is attributable to

25 percent of the world's population. Water consumption is also unevenly distributed throughout globe. The per caput water consumption in the United States is about 2300m<sup>3</sup> per annum, as compared to 1500m<sup>3</sup> for the Canadians and 225m<sup>3</sup> for the British whereas the average per caput consumption of water in developing countries ranges between 20 to 40m<sup>3</sup> (Combating Environmental Degradation IFAD). The consumption patterns for forest products and other commodities have the same inverse ratio to the size of population of the top 20 percent of the richest societies putting excessive pressure on both national and global natural resources. The rest of the world, comprising 80 percent of its population with a share of less than 20 percent of global income, has a modest consumption level.

Poverty and environmental degradation are directly related. Environment degradation has adversely affected the poor who depend upon the resources of their surroundings. Thus, the challenge of poverty and the environment degradation are two sides of the same coin. South Asian population is predominantly rural that is dependent on primary sector activities based on land, forests, livestock and water. There are many indications of environmental degradation in South Asia region which is pervasive and accelerating. It is putting at risk people's health and livelihood and hampering the economic growth needed to reduce the level of poverty in the region. Over-exploitation of natural resources such as forests and fisheries is more likely the result of actions of interests engaged in the pursuit of commerce.

International environmental concerns are often expressed in broad terms such as desertification or climatic change. The environmental problems of concern to vulnerable groups in marginal areas are generally localized in nature, revolving around issues, such as the degradation of a particular rangeland or soil erosion. These affect the poor because they are directly related to household food security. In their quest for food security, the rural poor sometimes overuse the limited resources available to them. The resulting environmental degradation imposes further constraints on their livelihood, thus completing the full circle. Their negligible capital assets and property rights, limited access to financial services and lack of participation in decision-making can result in adopting strategies available to them mainly in the form of natural resources. It also makes them more vulnerable to environmental degradation. In other words, the poor may be both agents and victims of environmental degradation, particularly in the areas, where the resource base is ill-suited to agriculture. In other words, poverty may be an underlying cause of environmental degradation. It is also seen as a proximate cause influenced by a complex of institutional factors. The very same processes that lead to poverty constrain the poor in their decision-making with regard to natural resource management. Poverty eradication would not erase environmental degradation but change the nature of environmental problems.

Productive technologies, fertile land and water, and high levels of development have raised incomes for the people living in promising areas in developing countries. These processes

vary across countries and regions depending upon demographic pressures, land fragmentation, privatization of common property lands, expansion of the commercial sector and reduced demand for labor. Thus, the challenge for poverty alleviation in high-potential areas remains considerable. Whereas for the 60 percent of poor populations who are found in fragile ecosystems and ecologically vulnerable rural areas, the challenge of environment protection and poverty alleviation is immense. It has been estimated that 80 percent of poor people in Latin America live in such areas, 60 percent in Africa and 50 percent in Asia. Consequently, fragile ecosystems are rapidly becoming the cause of poverty and environmental degradation.

Rural women play a key role in farm activities in South Asia. They participate in crop farming, animal husbandry and some off-farm activities. Their majority of time is spent in looking after livestock, from rearing to protecting animals, collecting fodder and water, collecting milk, looking after the health of animals, poultry, etc. This is particularly true in the case of ecologically fragile areas. The male migrates from these areas and the responsibility of women increases making them more responsible for the survival of the family. Women tend to be more vulnerable than men to the effects of environmental degradation because they are often involved in harvesting common property resources. Environmental degradation further burdens the responsibilities on women.

India occupies 2.4 percent of the world's land area and supports over 17.5 percent of the world's population [18]. As per the 2001 census, 72.2 percent of the population lives in about 638,000 villages, 48 percent of the adult population and 62 percent of adult women are illiterate, women are severely discriminated against, 53 percent of children under five are malnourished, 71 percent have no access to sanitation, 37 percent have no access to safe water, and there are around 100 million child laborers. 20 percent of the world's maternal deaths and 25 percent of its child deaths occur in India. India has been witnessing significant environmental degradation during the last few decades. The vast majority of the Indian people are directly dependent on the nature resources of the country for their basic needs of food and shelter. About 40 percent of people are still below the poverty line. Increasing industrialization, high-intensity agriculture, use of fertilizers and pesticides, deforestation, soil erosion, urbanization and population growth are the major environmental problems.

A World Bank report released in Islamabad on 3 September 2007 stated that environmental degradation is threatening to undermine Pakistan's growth prospects. The report said the costs of environmental degradation fall disproportionately upon poor people as they are most exposed to poor environmental quality. Environmental damage has severe impact in both rural and urban areas. With more than one-third of the population living in towns and cities, Pakistan is the most urbanized country in South Asia. Urban and industrial pollution is a rapidly growing concern. Since adopting the National Conservation Strategy (NCS) in 1992, the Government of Pakistan has made considerable progress in raising public awareness of environmental issues, and establishing

a framework for environmental management. The National Environmental Action Plan was approved by the Government in 2001, and a new National Environmental Policy (NEP) was adopted in 2005, accompanied by an increase in the budget allocated for environmental management. Due to its geographic location and various physiological and morphological characteristics, Bangladesh is subject to environmental degradation at the national, regional, and global level.

South Asia has a population density of 15 people per ha compared to world average of 4 people per ha. Annual deforestation rate in India is 0.34mha, while in Bangladesh and Nepal 3.3 and 1.7 percent annual forest decrease takes place [19]. According to FAO estimates over 60 percent of the population depends on agricultural activities for their livelihoods and shifting cultivation is practiced in some parts of the region. Mono cropping, overexploitation and heavy use of fertilizers has also lead to increased oil quality depletion in the region. The pricing of resources such as fertilizers play a major role in excessive utilization. India supports 20 percent of the world's livestock population. In India, floods affect an average of 8 million ha, out of which 3.7 million ha are cropped. Over exploitation of water resources had led to increased soil salinity in many parts of the region. Gem mining and in land coral mining in Sri Lanka have led to land degradation.

There are many causes for depletion of biodiversity. For instance, a well-defined land use policy is absent in all the South Asian countries. The present land tenure system does not provide security to the farmers, especially in Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Bangladesh records the highest deforestation rate from Asia (3.3 percent per annum). The dependency on fuel wood for meeting basic need is a common problem in the region. It is estimated that in India by year 2025, 75 percent of the rice production will come from less than 10 varieties, compared with thousands of varieties grown in the 1950s. In Pakistan, falcons are smuggled to the Middle East, lizards and snakes are killed for their skins and crocodile hunting is still a popular sport and recreation activity. The growing demand of traditional medicinal plants such as Neem and improved varieties of seeds by a few multinational companies, through intellectual property rights and patent regimes, has created new threats to the rights of indigenous communities.

In developing countries with large rural populations, non-privatized natural resources such as forests have a special importance. They provide a diverse range of products for daily use. Within poor households, women's dependence on these resources is especially high for several reasons. There is a gender division of labor. Within the family there is an unequal gender distribution of basic resources controlled by men, including resources spent on healthcare, education, and, food. Women have much less access than men to private property resources, especially land and assets. It is poor rural women and female children living in environmentally vulnerable regions, who are, therefore, the most affected by the effects of environmental decline. Women's direct access to economic resources assumes importance for both female welfare and family welfare. With a decline in forests there is often an increase in

women's time and energy spent on firewood and fodder collection. Incomes tend to decline, with fewer items to gather, and less time available for crop cultivation. While all household members suffer in some degree from these effects, women and female children are affected in greater measure.

To sum up, there has been a substantial thinning of dense forest, with a fall in productivity and biodiversity. Underlying this decline and degradation is a complex set of causes: The expansion of area under agriculture and plantations, the agrarian consequences of large hydroelectric and irrigation projects, population growth, urbanisation, privatization of village common land, technologies that are soil and water depleting and the erosion of community institutions that monitored village resource use, and increased pressure from tourism. There is today a widespread recognition of an environmental crisis especially in the rural context. Many poor traditional communities have developed complex resource management regimes. Many scholars are arguing for a strengthening of traditional community institutions for local resource management. Ecofeminism is becoming increasingly important in shaping agendas on women and the environment in international and national forums.

United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, who, since 1982, have been conscious that environmental problems affect women in very specific ways. A new programme in 1990, on Gender, Environment and Sustainable Development, was concerned with environmental problems related to water and energy, including specific issues of immediate relevance to women as waste disposal, the effects of pesticide use and nuclear testing. The development process has contributed to the growth in poverty, to an increase in economic and gender inequalities, and to the degradation of the environment which diminishes the means of livelihood of poor, particularly women. The need for urgent action can be recognized in South Asia as they constitute a significant part of the world's land resources. The role of ecosystem is also significant as they are important sources of water, energy, minerals. To a large extent it depends upon the strength of local institutions engaged in environmental and resource management which represent the interests of poorer people.

Social and gender discrimination and environmental degradation affect policy responses. Many issues need to be resolved. The distribution of costs and benefits of environmental change needs to be analysed. Its adverse impacts on poorer groups should be minimized. The impact of poverty reduction programmes on natural resource use and environmental quality accompanying measures to avoid unsustainable environmental damage should be focused. Environmental justice demands that the poor do not bear the costs of over-consumption by the rich [20]. In tackling the above issues, the 'gender dimension' must be addressed whenever it has a specific relevance.

### **Changing Approaches to Environment Management: A Source of Conflict**

In South Asia, State recognition of the environmental crisis associated with the decline of forests was slow. Government responses initially took the form of top-down tree-planting programs initiated in the mid- to-late 1970s. These involved both direct planting by the State and encouraging private farmers "farm forestry" and village communities to plant [21]. Although promoted under the banner of "social forestry," the State directly planted fast-growing commercial species such as eucalyptus useful to the paper and rayon industries, rather than species that provide for the fuel, fodder, and small timber needs of local people [21]. Government schemes took land that the villagers often used for multiple purposes without their consent or participation, leading to widespread local resistance. Women were rarely consulted in such schemes. The State's attempts to promote tree planting by communities were similarly top-down and had little success, while farm forestry, which was successful in terms of tree survival, favored commercial trees for profit rather than trees for domestic use. In particular, these schemes raised serious doubts about the ability of the State or of individual farmers to regenerate communal resources.

Majority of women work in agricultural sector, as workers, in household farms or as wagedworkers. Livelihood in agriculture has tended to become more insecure and women cultivators have been negatively affected. The government's policies for alleviating poverty have failed to produce any desirable results, as women do not receive appropriate wages for their labor. There is also significant amount of unpaid labor within the household. The increase in gender disparity in wages in the urban areas results from the employment of women in lower paying activities. They are exploited at various levels. They should be provided with proper wages and work at par with men so that their status can be elevated in society.

Women especially suffer from impacts of environmental degradation. Most ecofeminist emphasize that women have a special relationship with nature that gives them a particular stake in and a special ability to undertake environmental conservation. Ecofeminism calls upon women and men to reconceptualize themselves, and their relationship to one another and to the nonhuman world, in nonhierarchical ways. In bringing about this change, the feminist movement and the environmental movement are both seen to work together, on the assumption that they both stand for egalitarian, nonhierarchical systems. Attention to gender differences in property rights can improve the outcomes of natural resource management policies. It is important to identify the nature of rights to land, trees and water and how they are acquired. The liberation of women and of nature is seen as intimately linked.

### **Towards Action and Achieving Results**

The Human Development Report (HDR) 2013 focused on the countries from the South. The report said, "The rise of the South is fundamentally the story of the fast-paced transformation of the developing world and its profound impact on diverse facets of human development." The report concentrated on the South due to

the growing clout of the BRICS nations, “Although most developing countries have done well, a large number of countries have done particularly well- in what can be called the “rise of the South”. This growth is decided on the basis of different factors like health, education, poverty inequality in these countries. With emerging markets consumption, all set to rise to \$30 trillion and share in world output set to rise from 33 percent to 45 percent, the report presents bright picture of South.

In the rankings of the HDI 2013, India was at 136. Maldives and Sri Lanka are ranked higher than India being at 104 and 92 respectively. Afghanistan is at 175, Pakistan at 146 and Nepal at 157. Collectively, the South Asian countries have not changed much in terms of their positions or indexes. On the Gender Inequality index, India fares worst among the South Asian nations, barring Afghanistan. Other countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bhutan, Maldives, got ranks of 75, 80, 92, and 64 respectively. In South Asia, 65 percent indicated satisfaction with the state of health in their countries. Sri Lanka had the highest number of its population satisfied with the state of health at 83 percent while Pakistan was at an average 41 percent. In terms of education, the report acknowledged the need to educate women. The Human Development Report 2013 paints a glorious picture in terms of economic growth for the South. Despite this, the South Asian nations rank low on the Human Development Index. Even though the South seems to be doing extremely well economically, there is need to work on many more structural changes to ensure aspects like gender inequality, equity, poverty.

At the sub-regional level, South Asia Co-operative Environment Programme has actively collaborated with UNEP and the National Governments in the preparation of National and South Asia SoE Reports. These reports focused on the key prioritized environmental issues of the region including: Environmental challenges and responses in South Asia, land degradation & desertification, loss of biodiversity, fresh water depletion & degradation, solid waste management, degradation of air quality, environmental health issues, degradation and depletion of coastal and marine resources, natural disasters and their consequences. Participation in the management of forests has been gaining pace in the region since the late 1970's, particularly in Nepal and Bangladesh and India is in the lead in the establishment of forest plantation. Nepal has formed a Trust Fund for Biodiversity Conservation.

UNCED's Agenda 21, the global action programme for sustainable development, is perhaps the first expression of international commitment to addressing the poverty- environment nexus. Chapter 3 on “combating poverty” called for specific long-term strategies that integrate poverty eradication and sustainable management of the environment. Chapter 12 is devoted on “Combating Desertification and Drought” and Chapter 13 on “Sustainable Mountain Development” [22]. The proposals for action involves the major NGOs, focusing poverty eradication, the strengthening of a global information network and database, strengthening country capacity and the generation of “National Mountain Action Programmes”, raising awareness through the

preparation and organization of a World Conference on Sustainable Mountain Development in early 1997, and the formulation, negotiation and implementation of regional or sub-regional mountain conventions and possibly the development of a “Global Mountain Charter” [23].

In fiscal year 2012, the World Bank approved 54 projects in the South Asian region. Creating jobs for women will contribute to growth, equity and peace in the region. The World Bank produced a regional report, More and Better Jobs in South Asia, on how increasing numbers of high-quality jobs can be created in the region [24]. The South Asia region is working on a report on Equity for Development in which inequality in income and consumption will be studied alongside inequality of access and opportunities. World Bank support has helped South Asia achieve different results [25]. To mention some:

- a) Afghanistan: Child mortality dropped from 257 to 97 per 1,000 live births between 2002 and 2010,
- b) Bangladesh: Secondary school graduation rate increased from 30% to 39% from 2008 to 2011,
- c) India: HIV prevalence rate reduced and at least 3 million new infections averted through reaching at-risk populations,
- d) Nepal: 1 million people supported through Food Crisis Response program,
- e) Pakistan: 3.6 million families received income support of \$12 per month,
- f) Sri Lanka: 200,000 households in 1,000 post-conflict villages benefited from infrastructure/productive investment.

Development cannot be imposed from the outside. It should happen from within. With more than eight years of initiative, seven countries of South Asia came together to form South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in December 1985 to enhance peace and growth in the region. About 200 participants, comprising journalists, academics, trade unionists, human rights activists, NGOs and other civil society actors agreed to form an alliance to fight against poverty and injustice in South Asia. This led to the creation of the South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE). It was formalized later at the South Asia Civil Society Network meeting on poverty eradication in Kathmandu in December 2001. To enhance regional cooperation, focus should be on: people-to-people contact, and cooperation in water resources management among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, and Nepal, strengthens regional cooperation in wildlife protection, water resource management, food security, and disaster risk management. Sunderlal Bahugna's Chipko Movement has become an internationally known example of a highly successful conservation action program through the efforts of local people for guarding their forest resources. To remedy the problem of poverty in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, South Asian governments and international agencies have focused on raising the productivity of small farms and increasing opportunities for rural employment.



Rapid agricultural growth has benefited all classes of the poor. A variety of programmes intended to help the poor directly including research, extension, and training activities, the adoption of high yielding varieties of cereal, spreading new farming technology, encouraging multiple cropping, and increasing the cultivation of high-value crops are promoted. Programmes in dairying, poultry farming, commercial fishing, and forestry are considered, indicating that policy makers have neglected these potentially profitable activities. Dr. Ponna Wignaraja and Dr. Akmal Hussain [26] argue for an alternative paradigm of sustainable development and wholist approach to empower the poor and break with the local power nexus of the elite and bureaucracy that continues to marginalize the poor.

A more subtle understanding of poverty and inequality can help guide focused and practical analysis of the links between environmental quality, environmental policy, and efforts to reduce poverty. Over the past two decades, environmental degradation, including land degradation has continued to worsen exacerbating further poverty. As a result, awareness of the importance of the environment and its conservation has increased. There has been a transformation in people's perception of the poverty problem in developing countries. The new strategies are required that integrate poverty alleviation and environmental management. Until recently, the international community and national governments have tended not to appreciate the need for integrated rural poverty alleviation and environmental management programmes in marginal areas [27]. There were a number of initiatives in this field, undertaken by NGOs and community-based organizations, but they were usually small and much localized. At the same time, in many regions, rural people's perceptions of their environment and the priority they give to a better relationship with it have changed. Rural people are realizing that the environment on which they depend for their survival is being neglected or exploited, and it is now necessary to manage it sustainably. The environment belongs primarily to the rural people, and they must take the responsibility for the land and organize themselves in groups and associations.

In the past decade, economic growth has resulted in a growing gap between the rich and the poor breaking the prospects of growth. Inter and intra state conflicts, corruption and high fiscal deficits are likely to affect growth, without increasing productivity, efficiency, improved human resources and good governance. Greater priority should be given to empowering and enabling poor through their own organizations. Preference should be given to backward regions and women. A pro-poor growth strategy warrants higher investment, increased employment, increased efficiency, transparency and devolution that break the nexus of the powerful and create the power at the grass-root level [28]. This strategy must ensure better access of the poor to resources, skills, information, labor, land, means of livelihood, agricultural inputs and outputs and participation in the development process. Many policies and strategies in the past have failed because of their top-down approach and their reliance on technologies which were irrelevant to the local people. The micro-projects implemented in many places in the past have made it possible for the implementation

of new approaches. Asserting the importance of local knowledge calls for the empowerment of local people through their own organizations. There is a need for supportive measures on the part of governments [29]. The international community should also be aware of their responsibility. Research should be conducted on how environmental policies can help to reduce poverty and fulfill environmental goals. There have been several Government and Non-government organizations that have led to environmental protection. They have led to a growing interest in environmental protection and conservation of nature and natural resources. "Affirmative action" is needed in the form of finance and assistance to local communities. There is therefore need for a coalition of actors ranging from the international to the national and the local level [30].

### Conclusion: Enabling Sustainable Development

South Asian countries are facing various environmental challenges. Over-use of environmental resources is at the core of the challenge of sustainable development. It is the prevention of environment degradation in which all the countries must take part. It is essential to make the public aware of the formidable consequences of the environmental degradation. It is essential to get the country acquainted with these challenges so that their acts may be eco-friendly. Protecting the environment and reducing poverty are inseparable. Without poverty reduction, sustainable development cannot be achieved. It is the poor who are most vulnerable to the effects of environmental degradation. Effective actions against poverty and environmental degradation require first and foremost the empowering and equipping of local communities to take up the reins of resource management, local area development and improved local governance. The technology and related measures build on traditional knowledge must be emphasized.

Empowerment of women would not hold any meaning unless they are made strong, alert and aware of their equal status in the society. Policies should be framed to bring them into the mainstream of society. The need of the hour is to improve female literacy as education holds the key to development. Empowerment would become more relevant if women are educated, better informed and can take rational decisions. Men and women use resources differently and have different roles in society. It is therefore necessary to sensitize the other sex towards women. It is important to usher in changes in societal attitudes and perceptions with regard to the role of women in different spheres of life. Adjustments have to be made in traditional gender specific performance of tasks. A woman needs to be physically healthy so that she is able to take challenges of equality. The women's movement and the environmental movement both stand for egalitarian systems, and that the emancipation of both women and nature are closely linked.

Sustainable development poses a fundamental challenge to existing economic systems at national, regional and global scales. To be effective, strategies to decrease poverty and preserve the environment must therefore pay close attention to the impact

of disparities between women and men with regard to access to resources and opportunities. The private sector, as well as civil society at large, should also be encouraged to think beyond individual or corporate interests towards recognition of a shared responsibility for the environment. The people of South Asia with access to education, health care, and social safety will play an important role in the global development as it takes its place in the Asian Century. The South-South cooperation will ensure that there is actual growth in all the nations. With inclusive growth, South Asia has the potential to change global poverty.

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