Chapter - V
Where Do We Go From Here?

The basic premise of this work that international institutions, NGOs and regimes facilitate cooperation among states – the theoretical assumption of neoliberal institutionalism – to get to the bottom of global environmental problems does not hold in light of the findings of this study. The general assumption of this study in line with the neoliberal institutionalists’ position that the Indian state would be pressurized both from the above and below by global and local environmental movements to create a congenial atmosphere in which global issues such as environmental problems can be easily solved has been falsified by its findings. In other words, applying this theoretical understanding to study the foreign environmental policy of India in the real world situation clearly defy the neoliberal institutionalist understanding of environmental issues. This is borne out by the fact that while the Indian state very successfully handled the pressure from below by accommodating some claims of the local environmental movements, it has by and large managed to put the pressure from above in abeyance.

This is true of the situation not only at the level of Indian foreign environmental policy making, but of all the state actors in the world. This is more than evident from the failure of a series of environmental negotiations at the international level to forge the much desired and needed cooperation, as argued by the neoliberal institutionalists, to address environmental problems. What is even more surprising to observe is the relentless pursuance of ‘national interests’ by the different states despite the universally established fact that environmental issues are global in nature, requiring global solutions. Global solutions in turn require globalist outlook, which is conspicuously missing in the behaviour of state actors. Instead, as the study shows, despite the revolutionisation in the manner of information exchange and
dissemination of ideas unleashed by the forces of globalisation, the nature of international environment politics has remained mired in the dominant contest-ridden framework of power politics, with each state actor relentlessly pursuing its ‘national interests’. All this has clearly belied the hope and optimism of neoliberal institutionalists in the supposedly inherent power of meaningful cooperation to help resolve all kinds of contentious issues, including environment.

A study of the Indian foreign policy on environment, as seen in chapter three, in conjunction with the dominant features of global environmental agenda clearly reveals that the official Indian position is global only in rhetorical terms. India which is a developing country does perceive the environmental issues from the perspective of its peculiar position in world power structure. In such a scheme of things, then, development, and not environment, is privileged, negating the neo-liberal institutional assumption that institutions, NGOs, regimes, etc. would help create a congenial atmosphere in which cooperation would become the hallmark of international relations, setting the stage for global issues such as environmental problems to be resolved easily and amicably.

Much in contrast to the foundational assumption of the neoliberal institutionalism that states are more than keen to put their acts together and get into the mode of international cooperation by shifting their loyalties and resources to certain institutions, if these are seen as mutually beneficial, this study reveals that this is not so in the case of the Indian state which prioritises its concerns through the prism of ‘national interests’, bypassing the pressing environmental issues in the process. Being a developing country, the Indian state accords primacy to its economic and strategic interests over the global environmental concerns. This is so because the Indian state invariably looks at its economic interests, in terms of survival needs which naturally get precedence over environmental concerns which are significant nonetheless, but can not be accorded primacy over the basic means of livelihood issues.

What could be the possible factors that might help us explain why things are going awry, as they indeed are, defying the foundational assumptions of neoliberal institutionalism in the specific context of India. This could perhaps be attributed to the
nature of Indian environmentalism as well, which has primarily remained obsessed with local concerns and issues. Not that these are any less significant or that they do not deserve to be treated seriously, but in their legitimate quest for conserving the local issues and concerns, they have displayed stoic indifference towards global environmental issues. Most of the civil society groups operative in the form of environment-based NGOs have failed to pressurize the Indian state to adopt a proactive stance on global environmental issues which pose common global threats to the mankind at large. As this study shows, they have thus clearly failed to play their due role, with the exception of the NBA, in addressing the global environmental issues in line with the assumptions of neoliberal institutionalism. Interestingly, they can be seen to be supporting the Indian state by providing critical inputs, which help it strengthen its foreign policy aims and goals. Couched in the idiom of ‘developmentalism’ and ‘Third Worldism’, their activities have invariably been supportive of the Indian state’s demands for securing more concessions from the developed world in areas of technology transfer, and institutionalising non-binding provisions for the Third World countries in various international conventions and negotiations on environment.

The reason for this could well be their unwillingness or inability, much like the Indian state, to go beyond nationalistic concerns and adopt a globalist outlook. Such a failure in turn, however, does not mean that they are insensitive to the larger question of global environmental degradation, but simply emanates from their vantage point, which is rooted in more immediate and direct livelihood questions of everyday survival. Much like the status accorded to environment in the official discourse of the Indian state, the issue of development is privileged over that of environment in the Indian environmentalist discourse of the civil society as well.

There are other equally important reasons which preclude the Indian state or for that matter the Indian environmental civil society groups from adopting a proactive stance on the question of global environmental issues. One such reason, amongst others, is that the neo-liberal institutional approach is euro-centric. The western societies are post-industrialised societies and the civil society movements in such societies are far more effective in terms of their bargaining power vis-à-vis their states. Given such a scenario, they are better equipped to play an important role in
articulating the agenda of their respective states. Moreover, given the strong political networking that they already have in place, the NGOs of the developed world are far more effective in transnationalising certain common global issues, thereby exerting enough pressure on their respective states to adopt environment-friendly laws and policies. The strong presence of epistemic communities in the developed world further boosts the process of social-political networking of NGOs on common global problems. All these factors immensely favoured the acceptance of neo-liberal institutional approach in the western world. The neo-liberal institutional approach can thus be seen as designed to cater to the specific needs and conditions of the western societies.

In sharp contrast, the prevailing conditions in India are vastly different. It has not even fully entered the phase of industrialisation, let alone foraying into a post-industrialised phase. The civil society movements in India, despite some spectacular successes to their credits, are fairly week in comparison to their western counterparts. Moreover, the Indian state continues to remain the most powerful legitimate agency in terms of addressing all public and private matters. All claims made on the Indian state by various civil society groups are either considered ‘illegitimate’ or are out rightly dismissed in the first place. This leaves little scope for the various NGOs in India to exert the kind of pressure which is needed to ensure enactment of environment-friendly laws and policies. Moreover, external pressures by trans-national NGOs are dismissed by the Indian state on the ground that they are anti-national, and that they seek to perpetuate the neo-colonial agenda of the west. All this shows that India being a Third World country does not constitute a suitable case for the application of neo-liberal institutional assumptions as far as the environmental issues are concerned.

Another mainstream international relations theory which is often invoked by several states while articulating their position on environmental issues is the realist approach. Of all the theories, the realist and later neo-realist theory has continued to remain dominant in international relations. Scholars vary in their perspectives with regard to which particular theory is most suitably applicable in the Indian context. For example Rajan critiques the neo-realist approach by arguing that India’s interests and preferences in the various global environmental negotiations did not depict Indian state as a ‘defensive positionalist’ actor. He argues that Indian policy is not static, but
it shows a sign of learning. Second, Indian interests are not purely power-maximizing in nature, and that its bargaining strategy has been one of moderation. As he puts it, “The moderation in India’s bargaining strategy is underlined by the absence of any evidence that Indian policy-makers ever formally envisioned the use of the environment as a bargaining chip to make gains in other issue areas, such as international economic matters”\(^1\). Another argument that has been put forward against the neo-realist framework is that Indian policy was not entirely egoistic, as it worked for the welfare of the whole developing countries.

The whole process of environmental negotiations clearly demonstrates that little efforts have been made by the negotiating countries to protect the global environment. Although some developed European countries have shown some degree of sensitivity towards environmental issues risking their own economic interests in the process, the United States – the sole hegemon in the international system – has been unabashedly and aggressively pursuing the neo-realist policy of defending its own national interests at the cost of environmental security. The Third World countries in general and India in particular, on the other hand provide an altogether different case when it comes to the question of pursuing global environment agenda. None of them, in fact, has thus far been ready to sacrifice their national/economic interests to protect the environment.

Critics argue that in the various regional groupings of Third World countries of which India has been a part, it was advocated that the demand for creating a New International Economic Order should be converted into a demand for New International Environmental Order. This is so because the demand for New International Environmental Order involves the restructuring of international economic order. Secondly, on the question of Third World solidarity, critics have maintained that that India has pursued this policy simply because it did not want to be isolated in the environmental negotiations. Moreover, it wanted to enhance its collective bargaining power to force the north to concede the demands of the Third World countries. For example, the Indian government had specifically issued instructions to its negotiators during the climate change and biodiversity negotiations

that they must not get isolated from the Third World countries in opposing the north on crucial environmental matters.

It thus appears that both neo-liberal institutionalists and neo-realists have failed to provide a satisfactory and convincing analysis of global environmental issues. The applicability of these approaches to environmental issues, however, depends on the position one takes in the wider debate on environment among ‘modernists’ and ‘ecoradicals’. If one takes the position of ‘modernists’ then the traditional approaches may go a long way in addressing the global environmental issues. However, if one take the position of ‘ecoradicals’, the whole body of traditional approaches will have to be abandoned, since such a perspective requires restructuring of the whole society and not mere cosmetic treatments.