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Saripalli V Ravikiran
Doctoral Student, Jawaharlal
Nehru University, Centre for
Political Studies, New Delhi,
India

Sustainability and marginality: Reformulation of environmental identities

Saripalli V Ravikiran

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolving discourse on sustainability and its relationship to issues of marginality and social justice, with a focus on marginalized communities in India. It examines sustainability's impact on the global political economy, national development trajectories, socio-political structures, and marginalized groups. The limitations of mainstream sustainability are analyzed, including its anthropocentric biases. Concepts like Eco-Ambedkarism that integrate sustainability and anti-caste ideology are discussed as emerging paradigms. Strategies are proposed to expand sustainability's scope by incorporating intersectional issues and facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogues, especially with marginalized communities. The paper underscores that realizing an inclusive, equitable and just form of sustainability requires recognizing the perspectives of historically oppressed groups and consciously addressing deeply entrenched social injustices alongside environmental goals.

Keywords: Environmental identities, marginality, stewardship

Introduction

The concept of sustainability has risen to paramount importance in our contemporary world, touching upon the interconnected realms of environmental stewardship, social equity, and economic viability. At its core, sustainability seeks to strike a delicate balance – to fulfill the needs of the present while safeguarding the ability of future generations to do the same. This paper embarks on a comprehensive exploration of sustainability's far-reaching influence on the global political economy, development trajectories, socio-political structures, and the intricate issue of marginalization. As we delve into this multifaceted journey, it becomes increasingly evident that sustainability holds the key to forging a more equitable and resilient world, harmonizing with evolving environmental identities and shifting conceptions of minority. This paper explores the multifaceted dimensions of sustainability and its relationship to marginality across several pivotal sections. Beginning with the global political economy, it examines how sustainability considerations are reshaping international trade, regulations, and resource geopolitics. Shifting to national development, it analyzes sustainability's impacts on poverty alleviation, economic resilience, and human capital formation. The sociopolitical implications are probed through issues of social equity, governance, and conflict mitigation. A dedicated section delves into the intricate relationship between sustainability and marginality, highlighting vulnerable communities, green jobs, and climate migration.

The discourse then centers on India, analyzing the historical evolution of sustainability and its complex intersections with socio-political aspects and caste dynamics, focusing on marginalized Dalit-Bahujan communities. The limitations of sustainability are explored, emphasizing its anthropocentric biases and outlining an inclusive paradigm that embraces ecocentrism, long-term thinking, and holistic integration. Eco-Ambedkarism is presented as an emerging concept amalgamating sustainability and social justice incorporating shifting conceptions of minority. Strategies for expanding sustainability's scope and facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogues are proposed to formulate policies that uplift marginalized voices. Through its multi-dimensional exploration, the paper underscores that achieving true sustainability demands addressing environmental goals within an equitable framework that empowers the marginalized.

Corresponding Author:
Saripalli V Ravikiran
Doctoral Student, Jawaharlal
Nehru University, Centre for
Political Studies, New Delhi,
India

Before moving further, "Reformulation of environmental identities" in the title warrants further explanation. The term "environmental identities" likely refers to the dominant paradigms and worldviews that shape perceptions, narratives, and policies related to the environment and sustainability. Some examples of mainstream "environmental identities" include: Anthropocentrism - Prioritizing human needs and interests over ecological preservation; short-term thinking - Focusing on immediate gains rather than long-term sustainability; technocentrism - Over-reliance on technical solutions without social transformation; exclusionary conservation - Displacing marginalized communities for environmental goals.

The author argues these dominant identities need to be "reformulated" as they are inadequate or detrimental. Reformulation implies fundamentally reexamining and reimagining environmental identities through a new, inclusive lens. For instance, reformulation may involve: Shifting from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism that values nature intrinsically; adopting intergenerational thinking for long-term sustainability; integrating social justice into conservation rather than exclusion; incorporating marginalized perspectives into policy instead of imposing top-down solutions.

In essence, "reformulating environmental identities" likely signifies transforming mainstream environmental paradigms that are limiting or oppressive, towards more holistic, ethical and socially just perspectives on sustainability. The title highlights that this reformulation, especially uplifting marginalized voices, is vital for sustainability and addressing marginality.

Sustainability and the global political economy

The global political economy is intricately linked to sustainability due to the increasing interdependence of nations in an interconnected world. Sustainability considerations have catalysed changes in international trade, investment, and governance. Key aspects include:

- 1. Green Economies:** The transition towards green economies, driven by sustainability concerns, has led to the growth of renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and eco-friendly technologies. This shift has created new industries, jobs, and investment opportunities, altering the dynamics of global trade.
- 2. Regulatory Frameworks:** Sustainability has prompted the development of international agreements and regulations, such as the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which influence global economic policies and trade agreements. Compliance with these norms is becoming an integral part of international relations.
- 3. Resource Scarcity:** Sustainability concerns regarding finite resources like water, arable land, and minerals have introduced geopolitical tensions, as countries compete for access to these essential resources. This competition has political and economic implications.

Significance of Sustainability on Development Trajectories

Sustainability is pivotal in determining the trajectory of development for nations. It affects the quality of life, economic prosperity, and social equity. Key impacts on development include:

- 1. Poverty Alleviation:** Sustainable development aims to reduce poverty by ensuring that economic growth is inclusive and environmentally responsible. It promotes equitable access to resources, education, and healthcare, which are fundamental in poverty reduction.
- 2. Economic Resilience:** Sustainable practices, such as diversifying energy sources and investing in climate adaptation, can make economies more resilient to shocks, whether from natural disasters or global economic crises.
- 3. Human Capital:** Sustainable development emphasizes education, healthcare, and gender equality, which contribute to the development of a skilled and healthy workforce. This, in turn, enhances a nation's capacity for innovation and economic growth.

Socio-political Implications of Sustainability

Sustainability has far-reaching socio-political implications, as it touches upon issues of social justice, governance, and public participation. Some key aspects include:

- 1. Social Equity:** Sustainability challenges societal inequalities by focusing on equitable resource distribution, ensuring that marginalized communities have access to basic services, and addressing disparities in income and opportunities.
- 2. Participation and Governance:** The sustainability agenda encourages citizen involvement in decision-making processes. This promotes transparent, accountable, and responsive governance, which is crucial for long-term sustainability.
- 3. Conflict Mitigation:** Sustainable resource management can reduce conflicts over scarce resources, as equitable distribution and cooperative approaches are promoted over competition and strife.

Marginality and Sustainability

Marginality, often linked to poverty and social exclusion, is significantly impacted by sustainability efforts:

- 1. Vulnerable Communities:** Sustainability initiatives can either exacerbate marginalization or alleviate it. The focus on marginalized communities is essential to prevent their further exclusion from development processes.
- 2. Green Jobs:** Sustainability-driven sectors like renewable energy can provide employment opportunities for marginalized populations, offering pathways out of poverty.
- 3. Climate-Induced Migration:** Marginalized communities are disproportionately affected by climate change. Unsustainable practices can lead to forced migration, while sustainable adaptation measures can mitigate these effects.

The concept of sustainability, rooted in the idea of meeting current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs, has undergone a fascinating historical evolution. As this concept has developed, it has intersected with various socio-political aspects, bringing both positive and negative consequences. This section explores the historical evolution of sustainability, its interactions with socio-political aspects, and the particular challenges it poses to marginalized communities, with a focus on Dalit-Bahujan caste groups in India.

The Historical Evolution of Sustainability

- 1. Traditional Practices:** Early human societies practiced sustainability out of necessity. Indigenous cultures worldwide, such as Native Americans and Aboriginal Australians, had intrinsic connections with nature, often guided by sustainable practices that respected the environment's limits.
- 2. Industrial Revolution:** The emergence of the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century marked a significant shift. It brought about rapid industrialization, urbanization, and the exploitation of natural resources, leading to environmental degradation and social disparities.
- 3. Environmental Awareness:** In the mid-20th century, concerns over environmental degradation led to the rise of the environmental movement. Key milestones included the publication of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" and the first Earth Day in 1970.
- 4. Global Agreements:** The late 20th century saw the development of international agreements and frameworks, like the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which formalized sustainability as a global priority.

Sustainability's Intersection with Socio-Political Aspects: Positive Intersections

- 1. Social Justice:** Sustainability has often been associated with social justice. It emphasizes equitable access to resources, education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, aligning with socio-political movements advocating for equality.
- 2. Civil Society:** Engagement: The sustainability movement has empowered civil society organizations and grassroots movements to influence policy decisions, fostering more democratic and accountable governance.

Negative Intersections

- 1. Economic Disparities:** Some sustainability measures, such as increased regulations and costs for eco-friendly products, can exacerbate economic disparities, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities.
- 2. Land Conflicts:** The drive for sustainable land use sometimes results in land conflicts when indigenous or marginalized communities are displaced to make way for conservation efforts or development projects.

Challenges of Sustainability to Marginalized Communities

In the context of India, Dalit-Bahujan caste groups, historically oppressed and marginalized, face unique challenges in the pursuit of sustainability:

- 1. Land Ownership:** Access to land is a fundamental aspect of sustainability. Many Dalit-Bahujan communities historically lacked land ownership, making it challenging to engage in sustainable agriculture or benefit from conservation efforts.
- 2. Displacement:** Marginalized communities often face displacement due to large-scale development projects, such as dam construction or urbanization, which disrupt their livelihoods and traditional lifestyles.
- 3. Environmental Injustice:** Pollution and environmental degradation disproportionately affect marginalized

communities as they often reside in areas with inadequate waste disposal and limited access to clean water and sanitation.

- 4. Limited Access to Education:** Sustainability education and awareness are essential for meaningful participation in sustainable practices. Dalit-Bahujan communities often have limited access to quality education, hindering their ability to engage in sustainability initiatives.

Caste dynamics have long been a defining feature of Indian society, shaping various aspects of life, including interactions with animals and the environment. This section explores how caste influences the relationships with animals and nature within the discourse of sustainability, shedding light on both the positive and negative aspects of these dynamics.

Caste and Animal Interactions

1. Occupational Roles

Caste-based occupational roles have historically determined one's engagement with animals. Dalits, considered the lowest in the caste hierarchy, often worked with animals in tasks such as leather tanning and manual scavenging. Upper-caste individuals, on the other hand, frequently held positions of power and authority, allowing them to engage with animals primarily for leisure or agricultural purposes.

2. Animal Husbandry

Caste-based divisions have influenced animal husbandry practices. Upper-caste individuals have more access to resources for sustainable and profitable livestock rearing, while marginalized communities may struggle to adopt sustainable practices. Traditional knowledge about sustainable animal husbandry often remains confined within specific caste groups, limiting its dissemination to the broader population.

3. Animal Rights and Caste

The discourse around animal rights and welfare sometimes lacks sensitivity to caste dynamics. Calls for the cessation of practices like leather production can inadvertently affect the livelihoods of Dalit communities dependent on these industries. Caste-based cultural practices related to animals, such as specific rituals or festivals involving animal sacrifices, are often the target of animal rights activism, raising complex questions about cultural sensitivity and animal welfare.

Caste and Nature Interactions

1. Land Ownership and Agricultural Practices

Historically, caste-based landownership patterns have dictated agricultural practices. Upper-caste landowners have more influence over land use decisions, which can impact sustainable farming practices. Marginalized communities often lack access to arable land, limiting their ability to adopt sustainable agricultural methods and contributing to a cycle of poverty and environmental degradation.

2. Water Resources

Access to water resources, a critical aspect of sustainability, can be influenced by caste dynamics. Upper-caste communities may have better access to clean and adequate

water, while marginalized communities may suffer from water scarcity and pollution. Dalits, in particular, have faced discrimination in accessing common water sources, which impacts their agricultural and domestic sustainability.

3. Environmental Justice

Environmental degradation and pollution disproportionately affect marginalized communities. Industries often locate their operations near these communities, leading to health problems and displacement. Marginalized communities have limited representation in environmental decision-making, further exacerbating their vulnerability to environmental injustices.

Caste dynamics significantly influence interactions with animals and nature within the discourse of sustainability in India. These dynamics have complex and often unequal implications. While upper-caste individuals may have greater access to resources and opportunities for sustainable practices, marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, face numerous challenges in adopting sustainable approaches.

To foster a more equitable and sustainable future, it is essential to recognize the impact of caste dynamics on these interactions and address the associated disparities. This involves promoting inclusive and participatory decision-making processes, providing marginalized communities with access to resources and education, and engaging with cultural sensitivity in animal rights and environmental activism. Ultimately, sustainability in India must be rooted in social justice, recognizing and dismantling caste-based inequalities as an integral part of achieving environmental sustainability.

The concept of sustainability, rooted in the idea of meeting present needs without compromising the needs of future generations, has become a crucial global framework for addressing environmental and social challenges. However, it is not without its limitations, including its inherent anthropocentrism. Furthermore, the marginalization of Dalit-Bahujan caste groups in India highlights the need for a more inclusive and equitable form of sustainability. This section explores the limitations of sustainability, its anthropocentric bias, and the imperative of embracing a more inclusive approach.

Limitations of sustainability

1. Anthropocentrism

Sustainability often places human interests at the centre of its discourse, prioritizing the well-being of human societies and economies over nature and non-human species. This anthropocentric bias can lead to environmental degradation and exploitation of natural resources, as long as human needs and desires are met.

2. Short-Term Focus

Many sustainability initiatives are geared toward achieving immediate economic and political goals, which can neglect the long-term health of ecosystems and future generations. This shortsightedness can lead to unsustainable practices that harm the environment and perpetuate social inequalities.

3. Lack of Holistic Consideration

Sustainability tends to compartmentalize environmental, social, and economic factors, often failing to consider their intricate interconnections. This siloed approach can result in

solutions that inadvertently exacerbate social injustices and ecological degradation.

Marginalization of Dalit-Bahujan Caste Groups

1. Historical Oppression

Dalit-Bahujan communities in India have historically faced discrimination and marginalization due to their caste identity. They have been denied access to resources, education, and employment opportunities. This historical oppression has left them vulnerable to poverty, lack of access to healthcare, and displacement from their traditional lands.

2. Environmental Injustice

Many Dalit-Bahujan communities reside in areas prone to environmental degradation, including polluted water sources and proximity to industrial zones. Their lack of political power and economic resources often leads to environmental injustice, as they bear the brunt of environmental pollution and degradation.

Towards an Inclusive Form of Sustainability

1. Ecocentrism

An inclusive sustainability paradigm should shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism, recognizing the intrinsic value of nature and non-human species. This approach emphasizes the need to protect and preserve ecosystems for their sake, not just for human benefit.

2. Long-Term Vision

Sustainability should adopt a more forward-looking perspective, focusing on the well-being of future generations and considering the long-term impacts of current actions. This shift would encourage sustainable practices that prioritize the health of ecosystems and the planet.

3. Holistic Approach

An inclusive sustainability framework should integrate environmental, social, and economic factors, acknowledging their interdependencies. This holistic approach ensures that sustainability initiatives address both ecological and social issues.

4. Empowerment and Representation

Empowering marginalized communities, such as Dalit-Bahujan caste groups, through education, economic opportunities, and political representation is essential for inclusive sustainability. These communities should have a voice in decision-making processes that affect their environment and well-being.

The concept of sustainability, while valuable, is not without its limitations, particularly its anthropocentrism. Additionally, the marginalization of Dalit-Bahujan caste groups in India underscores the need for a more inclusive and equitable approach to sustainability. By embracing ecocentrism, adopting a long-term vision, taking a holistic approach, and empowering marginalized communities, we can move toward a more inclusive form of sustainability that respects the rights and well-being of all living beings and the planet we share. Only through this inclusive paradigm can we truly address the complex environmental and social challenges of our time.

Eco-Ambedkarism is an emerging concept that brings together the principles of environmental sustainability with the social justice and anti-caste ideology pioneered by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a prominent leader in India's struggle against caste-based discrimination. This section explores the intricate intersection of caste, nature, and non-human animal discourse within the realm of sustainability and examines how marginality is inherently linked to the sustainability agenda.

Eco-Ambedkarism: A brief overview

Eco-Ambedkarism is a term coined by the author during his MPhil (2016-2018) research in JNU at Centre for Political Studies with the title: Exploration of Dalit Environmentalism in India. Accordingly, Eco-Ambedkarism encompasses extension of anti-caste Philosophy to correct the asymmetries of power between human & non-human while correcting social hierarchies. In other words, challenges hierarchies within human-nature relationships. Dr. Ambedkar's teachings emphasized the struggle for the rights of marginalized communities, particularly the Dalits (formerly known as Untouchables), and called for an end to their oppression. Eco-Ambedkarism extends this philosophy to the environmental sphere, arguing that environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities and that the struggle for social justice must include ecological justice.

Intersection of Caste, Nature, and Non-Human Animal Discourse in Sustainability

1. Caste and Environmental Injustice

Land Dispossession

Historically, marginalized communities, including Dalits, have been systematically dispossessed of land, rendering them vulnerable to environmental degradation. They often reside in ecologically fragile areas prone to pollution and natural disasters.

Pollution and Waste

Marginalized communities frequently bear the brunt of industrial pollution and improper waste disposal. They are often relegated to living near polluted water bodies, landfills, or toxic factories.

2. Caste, Nature, and Food Systems

Agrarian Marginality

Many Dalits are engaged in agrarian labor, often facing landlessness and exploitation by upper-caste landowners. Unsustainable agricultural practices perpetuate this cycle of marginality.

Animal Husbandry

Caste-based occupational roles often determine access to certain livelihoods, including animal husbandry. Sustainable livestock rearing practices are often denied to marginalized communities.

3. Non-Human Animal Discourse and Caste

Leather and Animal Products

The leather industry is a significant source of livelihood for Dalit communities. The discourse around animal rights and sustainability can inadvertently affect the economic sustainability of these communities.

Cultural Practices

Certain animal-related cultural practices, such as the slaughter of animals during festivals, are targeted by animal rights activists. These practices have caste dimensions and must be approached with sensitivity.

Marginality and Sustainability

- 1. Access to Resources:** Marginalized communities often lack access to resources necessary for sustainable living, such as clean water, education, and eco-friendly technologies.
- 2. Health and Well-being:** Environmental degradation and pollution disproportionately impact marginalized communities, leading to health disparities and reduced overall well-being.
- 3. Displacement:** Large-scale development projects often displace marginalized communities, disrupting their traditional ways of life and rendering them more vulnerable to economic and ecological challenges.
- 4. Lack of Representation:** Marginalized communities are often excluded from decision-making processes related to sustainability and environmental policies, perpetuating their marginality.

Eco-Ambedkarism represents a crucial paradigm shift in the discourse surrounding sustainability. By acknowledging the intersection of caste, nature, and non-human animal discourse within sustainability, it underscores the importance of addressing social justice concerns alongside environmental initiatives. Marginality is inextricably linked to sustainability, as marginalized communities often bear the brunt of environmental degradation and have limited access to the benefits of sustainable practices. Achieving true sustainability requires a holistic approach that accounts for the rights and well-being of all, particularly those who have historically been marginalized and oppressed. Eco-Ambedkarism serves as a call to action for a more inclusive and equitable sustainable future.

The concept of sustainability, which seeks to address the complex interplay between environmental, social, and economic factors, has gained significant attention in recent years. However, to create truly effective and equitable sustainability policies, it is crucial to expand the scope of sustainability and include the perspectives of marginalized communities, such as Dalit-Bahujan groups in India. This section explores strategies for broadening the scope of sustainability and promoting dialogue among stakeholders, particularly the voices of the marginalized, to formulate more inclusive and effective sustainability policies.

Strategies for Expanding the Scope of Sustainability:

1. Incorporating Intersecting Issues

Sustainability policies should recognize that environmental, social, and economic issues are interconnected. They should address the complex challenges that arise at their intersections. Strategies should consider how environmental degradation, poverty, and social inequality affect each other and create a vicious cycle.

2. Elevating Cultural Diversity

Recognize that diverse cultural perspectives influence

perceptions of sustainability. Cultural heritage can offer valuable insights into traditional, sustainable practices. Encourage the documentation and preservation of indigenous knowledge related to sustainable agriculture, natural resource management, and ecosystem conservation.

3. Education and Awareness

Promote environmental and sustainability education programs that are accessible to marginalized communities. These programs should focus on the importance of sustainable practices and their benefits. Raise awareness about the implications of environmental degradation on marginalized communities' well-being and livelihoods.

4. Empowering Marginalized Voices

Facilitate platforms and forums for marginalized communities to express their perspectives and concerns regarding sustainability policies. Encourage the inclusion of diverse voices in decision-making processes by ensuring representation in relevant committees and government bodies.

5. Community-Based Initiatives

Support community-driven sustainability projects that are tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of marginalized communities. Empower local leaders and organizations within marginalized communities to drive sustainability efforts from within.

6. Research and Data Collection

Fund and conduct research on the environmental and social impacts of sustainability policies on marginalized communities. This data can inform policy improvements. Ensure that data collection methods are culturally sensitive and respectful of community privacy.

Encouraging Dialogue among Stakeholders

1. Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues

Organize inclusive dialogues that bring together government representatives, NGOs, academics, and marginalized community members to discuss sustainability challenges and solutions. Foster collaboration and the exchange of ideas among stakeholders with diverse perspectives.

2. Local-Level Engagement

Facilitate meetings and discussions at the local level, where the impacts of sustainability policies are most directly felt. Encourage open dialogue that allows community members to voice their concerns and ideas.

3. Capacity Building

Provide training and capacity-building programs to empower marginalized community members to actively engage in dialogues and contribute meaningfully. Ensure that the training is accessible and tailored to the needs of the community.

4. Transparency and Accountability

Promote transparency in policy-making processes and ensure that marginalized community members are informed about decisions that affect them. Establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of sustainability policies in addressing the concerns of marginalized communities.

Conclusion

The discourse on sustainability has expanded dramatically from its origins focused on environmental conservation to encompass intricate social, economic, and political dimensions. As evident through this paper's exploration, sustainability considerations now influence international relations, development trajectories, socio-political structures, and marginality across contexts. However, realizing the promise of sustainability requires transcending limitations like anthropocentrism and short-termism to adopt a holistic, inclusive, and equitable approach. The marginalization of vulnerable communities in the sustainability agenda, exemplified by India's Dalit-Bahujan groups, highlights the need to empower marginalized voices and address intersecting injustices.

Concepts like Eco-Ambedkarism that integrate sustainability and social justice provide valuable perspectives. But theory must be matched by actionable strategies to expand participation, spur dialogue, and formulate context-specific solutions. Sustainability policies and initiatives ought to be informed by diverse stakeholders, especially historically oppressed communities. As sustainability enters the mainstream, the focus must shift from just "doing less harm" to actively fostering social equity and ecological justice. The goal must be to uplift all towards clean, healthy and sustainable habitats where both present and future generations can flourish with dignity. The emerging discourse has immense potential to drive this change by addressing power asymmetries and embracing inclusivity. But political will and multi-sectoral collaboration are indispensable to realize sustainability's transformative vision for the planet and all its inhabitants. The journey towards sustainability is full of complex dilemmas, but with collective compassion, wisdom and determination, a more just, equitable and ecologically thriving world is possible. This paper underscores that enshrining social justice as a pillar of sustainability is integral to secure our shared future.

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