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*Behind India’s Intransigence on Climate-Change Talks*

By Madhur Singh

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TIME Magazine

Global warming and policies relating to climate change have recently become incredibly relevant and important issues to developed and developing nations around the world. Nations have had to enact “greener” policies and invest in the research of alternative energy sources. Specifically, developed nations, like the United States, must reduce their carbon and methane emissions, and developing nations, like India, must be wary so that they do not exceed the limit of emissions. However in developing nations, these policy changes do not always coincide with the populations and their ways of life. For the case of India, Madhur Singh wrote an article in TIME Magazine entitled “Behind India's Intransigence on Climate-Change Talks” describing the problems that climate change policy-makers have and what they are doing at the climate conference in Copenhagen to solve them. Specifically, the article addresses the opposition from the West and the Indian government’s plans to deal with global warming.

The article begins with the story of Narinder Kumar who cannot afford an electric steam iron for his washerman business. Instead he uses a coal-fired iron, like his ancestors and the generations before him did. Even if he could afford an electric iron, access to sustainable and reliable electricity is not easy to gain. He understands that his iron contributes to global warming, but he can do very little about it. As Gardner and Lewis explain in their book, access is an essential part of development. Many rural communities in India still do not have electricity and their access to it is very limited. Though Kumar is one individual, there are many more like him that all contribute to global warming. However, for any individual people to switch over to more efficient energy use, the Indian government needs to make it more reliable and accessible.

Another reason that climate change policy would be difficult to enforce in India is because there are cultural practices that contribute to global warming. New statistics are showing that the 283 million cows that roam the streets in India are heavily contributing to methane emissions in India. However, these cows are a religious symbol of India and are sacred to people practicing Hinduism. Having been to India, I cannot imagine it without the many cows roaming the streets. This is a way of life that would ultimately need to change if India needed to reduce methane emissions.

The policy-makers are aware of the lack of reliable electricity and the cultural dilemmas that exist in enacting climate change policy. To provide electricity and change the way of life, the government will need a lot more money. According to the article, the Indian government has already invested around $25 billion in solar-energy and energy-efficiency missions. Going ‘green’ is costly and the Indian government has called upon Western nations to fund their continuing efforts.

Unfortunately developed nations like the United States do not understand the complex cultural and societal issues that exist in developing nations such as India. The United States did not sign the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 because they believed it was unfair that developing nations like China and India were contributing to carbon emissions but did not have to make reductions. The US did not take into account the fact that nations like India have other issues that need to be changed before they can reduce their emissions. As a rebuttal to the American claim, the article bluntly points outs that, unlike in India, there is no serious effort to change lifestyle in the United States in order to minimize energy use.

Fortunately, in the case of India, the climate change policy-makers are aware of the issues that the people in India are facing. Gardner and Lewis stress that empowerment and participation of the people are essential when bringing about developmental change. Policy-makers are definitely on their way to realizing that they need to involve (through empowerment and participation) the people of India in making changes that will benefit the environment. These changes create a very complex situation for developing nations. On one hand, the changes may have negative effects on social and cultural practices. On the other hand, developing nations do have a moral obligation to the world to prevent further destruction of the planet. In this unique case, anthropologists are being called upon to “change the world”. They must help to find ways to incorporate changes while respecting the people of India and involving them in the process of change to save the planet.