Climate change in a de-globalising world

Chitresh Kumar | November 19, 2018

The post-Diwali pollution in Indian skies is just one of the many reminders of our civic indifference to pressing longterm pollution and climate change-based global causes. Collectively, amidst the various natural calamities in the last six months like cloudbursts in Uttarakhand, floods in Kerala and the Indian summer filled with sandstorms, leading to loss of life and property, it is time to reflect upon a systemic and systematic failure at all levels, be it by citizens, policymakers or the institutional framework designed to safeguard/ regulate environmental degradation.

The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Report once again has emphasised a seemingly lost battle in terms of temperature control by 1.5°C through reduction of nearly 40 gigatonnes of carbon emissions. However, the report goes one step further in providing details of the failures and provides specifics related to making of urban heat islands, where Delhi and Bengaluru appear to be more vulnerable than other urban settlements.

The prescriptive nature of the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Accord have been inherently flawed in nature from their inception. In addition, the constitution of Climate Technology Centre and Network under Paris Accord with a contributory funding of $100 Billion mostly from developed countries seems to be substantially off-track.

This has more to do with the fact that direct technology transfer and subsequent proliferation through technological spillover has a positive correlation with the volume of global trade, as they allow a virtuous cycle for more volume, leading to more profit, leading to more investment in R&D. However, the current economic trend of deglobalisation and closure of markets through tariff wars reverses the whole process of technology transfer.

It’s a phenomenon hypothesized by Daniel Bell, in his seminal work, ‘The World and the United States in 2013’ published in 1987, reflecting a lingering sense of failure of interlinked economies and fragmented politics. The state failed to become the common structural entity for solving inter-state problems like the current refugee crisis for European Union (EU) or the USA opting out of the Paris Accord and UNHRC.

The fact that USA, the largest proponent of democratic capitalism has opted out of the Paris Accord as well as UNHRC, should be seen as an event symbolic of the current economic approach. One needs to understand that trickling of funds to the Climate Technology Centre and Network could have been easily slowed down by the USA and similar restrictions can be placed for technology transfer, even when the USA was part of both the Paris Accord and UNHRC agreement. However, the fact that they chose to opt out makes the event a largely symbolic yet significant milestone in the fight against climate change.
In a globalised economic system of nation-states whose policies are clearly demarcated by populist citizen choices and are largely based on capital accumulation, there are no shared values. The new Keynesian economics approach adopted by the post-housing crisis world, emphasises largely upon the short-term nature of policies and therefore long-term issues like climate change are more prone to coordination failure. Comprised mostly of ‘laissez-faire’ approaches, its flaws create a populist, policy-driven economic environment, where even though there is demand for green technology, and there is supply of inputs, it will fail to coordinate production and consumption.

An adoption of this new Keynesian economic approach emphasising mostly upon employment and wages through short-term measures and the failure of interlinked economies has made the existing global policies ineffective and a future policy crisis for all global issues including climate change.

Beyond these policy failures, there seem to be localised cartographic anxieties, feelings of us versus them and the issue of absolute versus per capita emission. The fact that there are localised anxieties filled with urgency limited to places like Philippines, Bangladesh and Maldives having no say at the global policy platforms, further emphasise the urgency of global institutional restructuring.

This void at the international level in terms of policy and inter-governmental transfers for technology as well as funding, creates a non-facilitating environment for incremental innovation. The fact that most of the incremental technological development in the last 30 years have been about transferring the externalities from one place to another, be it vehicular pollution or nuclear energy, further aggravates the issue.

The overall geo-political void amidst these interlinked economies creates an incubatory ground for disruptive innovation, but to rely on such omens is like searching for a needle in the hay-stack. Till now the idea of the policy-makers or R&D has been to cater to the existing demand; what might be needed is to facilitate innovations disruptive enough to change the nature of the demand. However, under the existing political climate, this seems to be far-fetched.

The current dominant political philosophy of democratic states, with their liberal capitalism-based economic approach has been in its strongest phase in the last three decades. Considering that our planet is not going to sustain 10 billion or more people perpetually based on the existing consumption trends, the possibility of having influenced democratic voting choices as against informed democratic voting choices will alter and decide the course of survival of one population group against others.

The very thought of having such a lopsided world separates humans and rights from the idea of human rights and justice. And therefore, it brings us back to asking the same question of who should spearhead the global agenda of climate change in a rational democratic global ecosystem, where targets could be met in a conducive manner or even more philosophically stated by asking “are we choosing the right people to ask the right questions?” Amidst the current cracker-bursting Diwali civic indifference, this doesn’t seem to be the case.
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