

# **Environmental Racism, Environmental Justice**

*by Veena Gokhale*

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## Part I

I am an environmentalist with a difference. My focus is not merely the degradation of the physical environment, the impact of industrial toxins on human health, the need to preserve fast disappearing species and habitats and find alternatives to the present, anti-nature way of doing things. I am also concerned with the fact that environmental degradation affects different people differently.

“The environmental crisis impacts us all, but not equally,” says the Labour/Community WATCHDOG Organizing Committee. “Workers exposed to toxins on their jobs, people of colour in those workplaces and communities marked by industrial emissions and high-density traffic, and women in dangerous workplaces and vulnerable communities will pay the highest social cost. Thus, it is workers, women and people of colour who must generate new strategies and organizations for the environmental movement.”

The environmental movement in North America has been traditionally defined in white, middle-class terms. This section of the population has the political clout, media attention and self confidence to make itself heard and seen. Yet communities of colour, women, and the poor have always been at the forefront of the environmental struggle. But issues often get defined as labour or social issues, rather than environmental issues.

Traditionally the environment too has been defined in very narrow terms as non-human nature. The environment is not just pristine green spaces, the wilderness out there. There is also the urban environment: grass growing through cracks in the concrete, squirrels scampering around houses.

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With increasing urbanisation worldwide, more and more people are subject to urban environments and the problems of land, water and air pollution, poor housing and transportation, the lack or deterioration of urban infrastructure, health impacts of industries located in cities and so on. Indeed high unemployment and poverty rates, increasing urban violence and the deteriorating conditions in cities are well within the ambit of environmentalism.

### **Environmental racism**

Environmental and social issues are two sides of the same coin. Multinational corporations now decide the fate of local environments and communities while governments back away from former commitments to ensure the well-being of their citizens. The central question is who pays for and who benefits from the current economic systems? Who are the communities and countries that get dumped on and who does the dumping?

“In the United States, race interacts with class to create special environmental and health vulnerabilities. People of colour, however, face elevated toxic exposure levels even when social class variables (income, education, and occupational status) are held constant. Race has been found to be an independent factor...in predicting the distribution of air pollution, contaminated fish consumption, the location of abandoned toxic waste dumps and lead poisoning in children,” writes Robert Bullard, author of ‘Dumping in Dixie.’

Many studies have shown the unholy alliance between race and poisoned environments. A landmark study was undertaken by the Commission for Racial Justice (CRJ) in 1987. Some of the conclusions of the report titled *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States - A National Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* were:

- \* Communities with the greatest number of commercial hazardous waste facilities had the highest composition of ethnic residents.
- \* Three of the five largest commercial hazardous waste landfills in the USA were located in predominantly black or Hispanic communities.
- \* Three of every black and Hispanic Americans lived in communities with one or more such sites.

Rev. Benjamin Chavis, the director of CRJ, a grassroots organization in the USA fighting environmental racism can be credited with coining the term 'environmental racism.' He defines it as, "racial discrimination in environmental policy making and the enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of people of colour communities for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in our communities, and the history of excluding people of colour from leadership in the environmental movement."

Environmental racism gets played out on a global scale, reinforcing the inequities between the so-called First and Third worlds. The so-called developing countries are a prime target for locating polluting industries and dispatching hazardous industrial and nuclear wastes. Here is just one example of 'toxic colonialism': "Today more than 1,900 *maquiladoras*, assembly plants operated by American, Japanese and other foreign countries are located along the 2000-mile U.S.-Mexico border. These plants use cheap Mexican labour to assemble products from imported components and raw materials, and then ship them back to the United States. Nearly half a million Mexicans work in the *maquiladoras*. They earn an average of \$3.75 a day. While these plants bring jobs, albeit low-paying ones, they exacerbate local pollution by overcrowding the border towns, straining sewage and water systems and reducing air quality...The Mexican environmental regulatory agency is understaffed and ill-equipped to adequately enforce the country's laws." writes Bullard.

Why are people of colour targeted? Very simply because they are seen as weak, vulnerable and helpless. Many people in low pay, low skill jobs do not have the power to choose the conditions under which they work or live. In today's see-saw economy the fear of job loss has undermined the power of workers and unions even further, making environmental racism more widespread.

But resistance to environmental racism is growing as well. Grassroots environmental groups have mobilised all over North America around issues like waste-facility sitings, lead contamination, pesticides, water and air pollution, Native self government, nuclear testing and workplace safety. Some of these organizations use confrontational strategies used earlier by civil rights groups. Environmental racism is being increasingly documented and mainstream environmental groups too have been forced to acknowledge and respond to the environmental justice agenda.

### **The movement for environmental justice**

In 1991, more than 600 Africans, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans and people from many countries came together at The First National People of Colour Environmental Leadership summit held in Washington D.C. Here they adopted the Principles of Environmental Justice, from which I now excerpt:

“We, the people of colour, gathered together....to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of colour to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of safe livelihoods; and to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt the Principles of Environmental Justice...”

The 17 principles cover a diversity of issues: promote the ethical and balanced use of land and resources for creating a sustainable planet, stop the production of toxins and hazardous wastes, demand equal participation in environmental decision making, develop urban and rural ecological policies to rebuild our environments, oppose the destructive operations of multinationals and military oppression, call a halt to use people of colour as guinea pigs for medical experimentation and so on.

It is inevitable that the words environment and justice have come together. And together they will stay. As Rev. Jesse Jackson, dubbed the semi-official leader of Progressive America by E magazine, puts it, “We've always thought of social justice as the legal right to coexist equally with other people - equal protection under the law. Traditionally, race, sex or class have been impediments to that equality. But there's always been an underlying assumption that you had the right to breathe free, to drink clean water and have dirt that is not poisoned with dioxin.

There were mass movements for social justice, for example, to end slavery and for women's suffrage. But now all those rights are threatened by environmental terrorism, by the abuse of the planet in which those rights might be exercised or implemented. And thus we see in our fervor for rights that without the right to breathe, nothing else really matters.”

**Article sources:** Every Breath We Take, Of Toxic Racism and Environmental Justice, E, The Environmental Magazine, June 1992, Confronting Environmental Racism, Voices from the Grassroots, edited by Robert D. Bullard, L.A.'s Lethal Air, New Strategies for Policy, Organizing, and Action, Labor/Community WATCHDOG.

## ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM, ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE, Part II

### **Organising against environmental racism**

“Activists of colour have begun to challenge both the industrial polluters and the often indifferent mainstream environmental movement by actively fighting environmental threats in their communities and raising the call for environmental justice,” writes Robert D. Bullard, an environmental justice activist and writer-academic.

The environmental justice movement has a wide focus. As Bullard puts it: “These grassroots groups have organized themselves around waste-facility siting, lead contamination, pesticides, water and air pollution, Native self-government, nuclear testing, and workplace safety... A growing number of grassroots groups and their leaders have adopted confrontational direct action strategies similar to those used in earlier civil rights conflicts. Moreover, the increasing documentation of environmental racism has strengthened the demand for a safe and healthy environment as a basic right of all individuals and communities.”

What are some of the characteristics of North American environmental justice groups? Research has shown that the thousands of groups that have emerged to fight corporate irresponsibility and government indifference are often led by women. “Women activists were quick to express their concern about the threat to their family, home and community. The typical organizer found leadership thrust upon her by immediate circumstances with little warning or prior training for the job. Lack of experience, however, did not prove an insurmountable barrier to successful organizing,” writes Bullard.

Environmental justice groups tend to have a multi-issue agenda with social inequity and basic civil rights - housing, education, employment, health care, criminal justice and politics - as major organising themes. This makes them distinct from traditional environmental

groups which tend to have a single-issue focus and may not be as conscious of equity issues.

I believe that the multi-issue approach links North American grassroots groups to social and environmental groups in the so-called developing countries, where a single-issue approach does not work. There is an urgent need to question inequity in all its guises, be it the oppression of women, nature, people of colour, minorities, the poor, homosexuals and lesbians, the disabled, and so on. Fundamental social change happens when exploitative relations are questioned, and replaced gradually by democratic, collective practices. Environmental justice is the umbrella which shelters diverse social change agents and groups, allowing for cross-issue networking and organizing. The aim is to work towards a fair, healthy and sustainable society.

### **Environmental justice: Toronto**

Many Canadian groups, whether they are involved in labour, anti-racist, feminist, environmental or social justice issues, directly or indirectly tackle questions of environmental racism and justice. Undoubtedly environmental justice issues are best articulated within the context of indigenous rights and native organizing. This article however has a local, non-native focus. The organizations I will discuss are the South Riverdale Community Health Centre, the NAC (National Action Committee for the Status of Women) Environmental Committee and the newly formed Multiracial Network for Environmental Justice (MNEJ). My intention is to spotlight local initiatives and invite participation.

The South Riverdale Community Health Centre is a non-profit, health promotion organization in Toronto. It shot into fame 25 years ago while organizing around the issue of lead contaminated soil, waging a successful, on-going struggle against the culprit - Canada Metals. Currently, the Centre is involved with community-based health promotion and policy level work.

“We are very concerned with the social determinants of health and adopt a holistic perspective,” says the Centre’s Environmental Health Promoter, Nita Chowdhary. “Among our target populations are seniors and low-income families. We work on issues of poverty and violence. We do pre-natal education in non-white communities.”

As Environmental Health Promoter Chowdhary’s focus right now is low cost

housing. "Housing has not been traditionally seen as an environmental issue, but it is. It is also an equity issue because the poor live in bad housing. It's an important health issue because, for example, indoor mould build-up can cause respiratory problems," she says.

The questions Chowdhary poses are: who lives near industrial areas and heavy density, traffic arteries? How can the community have a say in urban planning, particularly as it relates to their own neighbourhood? Can people have an influence on which industries are located in their immediate environment?

The South Riverdale Community Health Centre has devised an interactive play about indoor air quality. The play looks at the issues of who has power in society, who does not. It also explores the contentious issue of 'scientific' knowledge. A community can often lose out to 'experts' who are not only outsiders, but also allied to the powers-that-be.

The NAC (National Action Committee on the Status of Women) Environmental Committee was founded in 1993. Says co-founder Sabina Nagpal, "We work on translating grassroots environmental action into environmentally sound national policy. We are a watchdog organization."

Some of the goals of the NAC Environmental Committee are promoting recognition of the relationship between oppression due to gender, race, class, lower socio-economic status and exposure to adverse environmental conditions, making overt the links between violence against women and other marginalized people and violence against the earth; the violence of militarism and that of debt and structural adjustment policies, ensuring that environmental issues are incorporated into women's issues as well as social justice issues, and ensuring the protection, preservation and promotion of healthy environments through education, community action, legislation and advocacy.

"We achieve our goals through policy and advocacy work, writing briefs, doing environmental assessment. At every NAC AGM questions are submitted to the main political parties on various issues including environmental issues. We also organize workshops and discussions and promote public awareness about environmental issues, more specifically environmental justice issues," says Nagpal.

The other founding member of the NAC Environmental Committee is Andrea Ritchie, an environmental activist and feminist who also works for the Women's Network for Health and the Environment (WNHE), a dynamic, Toronto-based

organization. WNHE works on exposing the link between environmental toxins produced by the current industrial system and its impact on women's bodies (1 in 9 Canadian women have breast cancer).

I am part of a collective which has started a new organization - the Multiracial Network for Environmental Justice (MNEJ). This is a community-based, non-profit organization which wants to work with diverse ethno-racial communities to develop alternative approaches to social change and foster local-global links. MNEJ will provide its individual members and member organizations with opportunities for networking, building durable partnerships, sharing resources, acquiring organizing skills and experience. We will undertake and support various environmental justice projects.

I felt, as a new Canadian, a woman of colour, and as a social activist and environmentalist, that the traditional environmental movement was not addressing many of my concerns. My colleagues at MNEJ feel the same way. So we decided to form MNEJ to work at the intersections of social, environmental, labour, anti-racist and feminist issues.

We define MNEJ as a non-hierarchical network that uses a consensus-based decision making model. Future initiatives include public education, child care co-ops and working with youth. We meet once a month. The next meeting is planned for 12 August.

A joint workshop organized by the Multiracial Network for Environmental Justice and the Cross Cultural Communication Centre is scheduled for Fall 1996. This workshop will provide an opportunity for interested individuals and organizations to come together to discuss what specific environmental justice issues they want to address, how they want to go about doing that and the resources they can share. The workshop will also provide more clarity about environmental racism and organising for environmental justice.

If you are interested in joining MNEJ contact me at 462-3721 for more information. This is an exciting time to join because we are in the process of defining our organization and there are all sorts of possibilities. There is also a lot of work to be done.

**Article sources:** Voices from the Grassroots, edited by Robert D. Bullard. Interviews.