



India and the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities’

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Abstract

The principle of ‘Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities’ or CBDR-RC is the cornerstone of justice in the global climate change regime. This principle has helped ensure that countries take differentiated climate actions based on equity, historical responsibility and respective capabilities. It is embedded within the UNFCCC under Article 3.1 and influences every other area of climate action – mitigation, adaptation, climate finance, Loss and Damage, technology transfer and transparency. Nevertheless, the CBDR-RC principle has been a hotly debated principle between the North and the South and has witnessed a remarkable shift in its interpretation and application over the years. From a climate change regime based on strict differentiation between developed and developing countries under the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol, we have seen a loosely differentiated regime under the Copenhagen Accord and the Paris Agreement. India has been one of the strongest champions of the CBDR-RC principle. It played a leading role in shaping the CBDR-RC principle at numerous stages, such as during the making of the UNFCCC (1992), the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Paris Agreement (2015). India’s role was particularly crucial in embedding the notions of equity (per capita emission as the basis of allocating emission reduction responsibilities among Parties) and historical responsibility into the CBDR-RC principle. Based on the CBDR-RC principle, India calls on developed countries to take lead in climate change mitigation and to support developing countries in their mitigation and adaptation measures. While India’s approach to differentiation helped it avoid emission reduction responsibilities, its position on CBDR-RC was challenged towards the Copenhagen COP of 2009. As a result, India’s stance on CBDR-RC got modified which helped arrive at the Copenhagen Accord and later the Paris Agreement. This article analyses India’s role in shaping the principle of CBDR-RC, including the shift in its own interpretation from the time of the making of the UNFCCC to the conclusion of the Paris Agreement.

Keywords: Climate justice, equity, historical responsibility, CBDR-RC, UNFCCC

Introduction

Climate change is the most severe crisis before the world today. It started as an environmental issue having a simple solution, i.e., the reduction of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to a sustainable level. However, soon developing countries realised that the climate change issue was deeply embedded in justice concerns as it imposes disproportionate burdens on them. It can be noted that developing countries which are the least responsible for causing climate change are the greatest victims of climate change. They lack financial and technological capabilities to deal with the negative effects of climate change, such as sea level rise and frequent climate-induced disasters, such as cyclones, floods and droughts. These negatively impact agriculture in these countries, putting food security at risk. Moreover, for developing countries, socio-economic development and poverty alleviation are major concerns that could be undermined due to mitigation responsibilities. As a result, when climate change negotiations began for addressing the problem, they demanded fair allocation of emission reduction responsibilities between developed and developing countries as well as financial and technological resources from developed countries for taking climate actions. To support their demand, they advocated the principle of ‘Common but Differentiated Responsibilities’ or CBDR.^[1]

The CBDR principle is at the heart of climate justice for developing countries. This principle or concept recognises the need for a differentiated approach towards fixing liabilities of countries towards environmental protection. In environmental issues, the CBDR explains that though all

countries contributed to environmental changes, the developed countries are more accountable than the developing countries for the harm they have caused in their flight for rapid development. In the context of climate change, the CBDR principle states that “the developed country Parties should take the lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof” (United Nations 1995)^[16]. Notably, the CBDR principle is not unique to the climate change issue. The origin of the CBDR-RC principle can be traced back to the Stockholm Convention of 1972 where the idea of differentiated responsibilities of countries first emerged. The principle has been central to the successful functioning of environmental governance such as the 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer and the Basel Convention of 1989. Similarly, the CBDR is a part of the Rio Principle contained in Principle 7.

The premises of the CBDR-RC principle in climate agreements are the historical responsibility of the Global North, per capita equity and right to development (of developing countries). The historical responsibility principle is the most dominant justice claim advocated by the Third World countries to shift emission reduction obligations on developed nations and demand financial and technological assistance for climate actions (both mitigation and adaptation) in developing countries. This principle is based on the fact that industrialised nations are historically responsible for the current accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere led by indiscriminate burning of fossil fuels since the industrial revolution that caused climate change. Accordingly, it is the developed nations that

should bear the cost of addressing climate change. While historical responsibility is a key justice claim of all developing countries, developed countries have shown difference in their acceptance of this principle. During the making of the Convention, while European nations agreed to take lead in climate actions based on their historical responsibility, the USA agreed for climate actions based on its economic and technological capabilities rather than historical responsibility (Bodansky 1993)^[2].

The per-capita equity principle emphasises current equality rather than past responsibility, arguing that everyone is entitled to an equal share of the global atmospheric commons (Baer *et al.* 2000; Jamieson 2001; Singer 2002). In the context of climate change, this principle suggests per capita equity in GHG emissions. Accordingly, since the per-capita emissions of greenhouse gases is low in developing countries, they should be allowed to increase while per capita emissions in developed nations should decrease to achieve the global convergence of per capita emissions. In other words, developed nations should create more carbon space for developing countries in order to let developing countries meet their social and developmental needs. The 'per capita emissions' has been championed by large developing countries like China and India with low per capita emissions. It also suggests that everyone should be equally impacted by the impacts of climate change implying that those who are vulnerable to climate change impacts must be supported in their adaptive capabilities (Joshi 2014, p. 681). It forms the basis for the demand of financial and technological support for adaptation by developing countries.

The 'right to development' approach to climate justice is synonymous with right to carbon emissions and is based on each person's and every country's right to pursue economic development to improve their livelihood. This principle is also supported by the principles of historical responsibility and per capita equity. It suggests that like today's developed nations, developing countries have equal rights to develop their economies to uplift their economies and improve the livelihoods of their people. As a result, developing countries should not be asked to accept binding emission reduction targets that would compete with more pressing development priorities (Joshi 2014).

Evolution of CBDR-RC within the UNFCCC

Differentiation in the mitigation responsibilities of developed and developing countries was a key demand of developing countries during the making of the UNFCCC. Taking clue from the UN General Assembly Resolution 44/128, the Rio Principle 7, and from the INC negotiations^[2], the UNFCCC expressly incorporated CBDR-RC principle in Article 3.1 which calls on industrialised countries to "take the lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof". This is reflected in the Convention by differentiating between Annex I Parties and those Parties not listed in Annex I to the Convention (non-Annex I Parties). The Convention requires Annex I Parties to reduce their GHG emissions to 1990 levels by end of the 1990s. Within these two basic groups, further differentiations are made to take account of the different capacities, specific situations and vulnerabilities of Parties. Within Annex I, Parties listed in Annex II to the Convention are required to provide financial assistance and facilitate the transfer of technologies to developing countries to help them implement their commitments under the

Convention. On the other hand, the least developed countries within the non-Annex I Parties are given special consideration under the Convention because of their limited capacity to respond to climate change and adapt to its adverse effects.

While differentiation is ingrained within the UNFCCC framework, the Kyoto Protocol became the high point for the differentiation principle when it placed developed nations under legal obligations to take quantified emission reduction targets. On the other hand, no such obligations were prescribed for developing countries. This has been the strongest and the most explicit expression of the CBDR-RC principle in any climate treaty. Further, developed countries (Annex II) had obligations to provide new and additional financial support, transfer environmentally sound technologies and build capacity in developing countries. For developing countries, it was unfortunate that the Kyoto climate regime could not survive long. The strictly differentiated climate regime under the Kyoto Protocol was replaced by a soft differentiated regime under the Paris Climate Agreement at COP21 held in 2015. Article 2.2 of the Paris Agreement states: The Agreement will be implemented "to reflect equity and CBDR-RC, in the light of different national circumstances." Under the Paris Agreement, all countries who are Party to the Agreement took voluntarily determined emission reduction targets called Intended Nationally Determined Targets (INDCs). Thus, the simply binary division between developed and developing countries has become a thing of past. Instead, a subtle (and more ambiguous) differentiation remains between developed and 'other countries' "in light of national circumstances" (Dimitrov 2016)^[4]. The phrase – "in the light of different national circumstances" signals a shift from rigid categories to a more nuanced, evolving differentiation.

India's Role in Shaping the CBDR-RC Principle

India has been one of the key advocates of the CBDR-RC principle. In fact, the CBDR-RC principle has been the cornerstone of India's negotiating stance in the multilateral climate negotiations. India, as noted earlier, was sceptical of the climate agenda of the global North. As a large developing country with huge socio-economic and poverty challenges, India was concerned that its economic growth does not get compromised in the name of addressing climate change, a problem caused by developed nations. Towards this, while accepting the global concern for climate change, Indian climate negotiators laid great emphasis on the just allocation of emission reduction responsibilities to developing countries. India played a leading role in the shaping the 'common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities' or CBDR-RC principle which informs the allocation of emission reduction responsibilities among the Parties to the Convention. As noted earlier, the principle of CBDR-RC got diluted at the Copenhagen COP in 2009 which culminated into a compromised CBDR-RC under the Paris Agreement later at COP21 in 2015. The below sections explore India's role in shaping the evolving principle of CBDR-RC at three critical junctures, first, during the making of the UNFCCC (1992), the Kyoto Protocol (1997), the Copenhagen Accord of 2009, and finally during the making of the Paris Agreement at COP21 in 2015.

During the making of the UNFCCC

The CBDR-RC principle and its application were widely contested during the making of the UNFCCC under the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC). India, concerned about the threats of environmental colonialism and the need to protect the sovereignty of developing countries, was keen on playing the role of ‘rule shaper’ rather than ‘rule-taker’ in the new climate regime. Even before the making of the Convention, India had convened the ‘Conference of Select Developing Countries on Global Environmental Issues’ in New Delhi in April 1990. In the conference, India succeeded in securing the general support of the developing world in favour of its position that developed nations should own the primary responsibility for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions since these countries were historically responsible for the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Additionally, India also based the CBDR-RC principle on the ground that every human being had an equal right to atmospheric space. During INC negotiations, India’s chief negotiator Chandrashekhar Dasgupta stated India’s position that the problem of climate change was caused by the excessive per capita emissions of greenhouse gases by developed countries and therefore, equity demanded that it was developed countries’ responsibility to take corrective action. Furthermore, since per capita emissions in developing countries were much lower compared to developed nations, they should be allowed to grow while per capita emissions in developed nations should decrease leading to per capita emission convergence. Hence no GHG reduction targets could be prescribed for developing countries. (MoEF 1990). India’s position on differentiated responsibilities of developed and developing countries helped build southern solidarity initially. India’s formulation of the ‘per capita emissions’ found mention in the Preamble of the UNFCCC (non-mandatory) which reads as:

Taking into account the fact that the largest share of historical and current global emissions of greenhouse gases has originated in developing countries, that per capita emissions in developing countries are still relatively low...

Apart from the historical responsibility and high per capita emissions, India also pointed to the financial and technological capabilities of developed nations to take climate actions which formed the basis of the CBDR-RC principle later incorporated under the UNFCCC principle under Article 3.1, which reads as follows:

The Parties should protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind, on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities. Accordingly, the developed country Parties should take the lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof.

During the Making of the Kyoto Protocol

Having helped create a differentiated climate regime under the UNFCCC which favoured developing countries, India’s main task beginning with the first COP held in Berlin in 1995 was to preserve this differentiated regime which was not liked by many developed nations especially the USA. At COP1, many developed nations led by the USA were adamant on revising the UNFCCC framework by doing away the binary differentiated regime and by bringing major developing countries like China, India, and Brazil within the fold of countries with emission reduction targets (Sengupta 2019) ^[13]. India strongly opposed such attempts of the USA

since these went against the UNFCCC and its principle of CBDR-RC. India’s role at the Berlin COP proved to be extremely crucial in securing the Berlin Mandate, which provided for the development of a protocol with quantified emission reduction targets only for developed nations and explicitly noted that the process should ‘not introduce any new commitment’ for developing countries (UNFCCC 1995). The Berlin Mandate laid the basis for the strongest differentiated climate regime under the Kyoto Protocol with legally binding quantified emission reduction targets only for developed countries while creating no additional commitments for developing countries over what was agreed under the UNFCCC originally.

At the Kyoto Summit, developed countries once again attempted to revise the differentiated framework. But, again, developing countries opposed this strongly. India played a key role in opposing an article on voluntary commitments for developing countries (Article 10). It said that the proposed article went against the UNFCCC and the Berlin Mandate which had prescribed no new commitments for developing countries. Finally, the Kyoto Protocol came with legally binding quantified emission reduction targets only for developed countries without creating any new obligations for developing countries.

During the making of the Copenhagen Accord

Post the successful entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol in 2005, negotiations shifted to – first, the future of Kyoto Protocol once its first phase gets over in 2012. Second, the inclusion of those countries which had either not ratified the Kyoto Protocol (the USA) or had not committed to any emission reduction target (developing countries). It resulted in negotiations under two parallel tracks, first, the ‘Ad hoc Working Group on Further Commitments for Annex I Parties under the Kyoto Protocol’ (AWG-KP); and second, the ‘Ad hoc Working Group on Long-Term Cooperative Action’ (AWG-LCA). Negotiations under the two tracks were to lead an agreement at Copenhagen COP (COP15, 2009). In the negotiations leading to the Copenhagen Summit, the most contentious issue were emission reduction responsibilities of large developing countries as well as nature of the new agreement.

On the question of differentiation which affected emission reduction responsibilities of large developing countries, Parties were extremely divided. While the developed countries favoured removal of the binary differentiation between developed and developing countries, they also found support from climate vulnerable countries such as the small island countries and the least developed countries which now emphasised on difference between large developing countries and them. These countries (SIDS and LDCs) wanted a new legally binding agreement with emission reduction targets for all major emitters including large developing countries. At this stage, large developing countries such as China and India were under pressure to take some form of mitigation commitments. Notably, by this time, while China had replaced the USA as the largest GHG emitter, India was also among the top 5 largest emitters globally. Further, with their rise as major global economies, it was not easy for them to avoid climate responsibilities.

At this crucial juncture, India tried hard to preserve the strict differentiation between developed and developing countries by championing second phase of the Kyoto Protocol (Kyoto 2) with stronger emission reduction targets for developed

nations. However, in a significant departure from its traditional stance, it agreed for voluntary emission reduction targets for all countries (including developed nations) instead of legally binding or strong economy-wide targets for 2020 and beyond. Before the Copenhagen COP, India's then Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh declared that India was considering a 'per-capita plus' approach moving from the 'per-capita emission' approach. At Copenhagen, India announced its voluntary and non-binding emission reduction targets as well – to reduce its emissions intensity of GDP by 20-25% by 2020 (relative to 2005 levels). Thus, the Copenhagen COP marked a significant shift in India's position on differentiation in the UNFCCC-based climate change regime. With its advocacy of Kyoto-2, while India continue to champion strong differentiation in the short term and with its acceptance of voluntary targets, it signalled its willingness to water down its traditional position on differentiation in the long term. This shift was crucial to the conclusion of the Copenhagen Accord, which established a self-differentiation-based voluntary climate regime, unlike the strict differentiated Kyoto regime.

During the making of the Paris Agreement

Post-Copenhagen, the CBDR-RC principle was once again at the centre of contestation. India under a new Environment Minister, Miss Jayanthi Natarajan, tried its best to prevent the CBDR-RC principle from being diluted. At the Durban COP (COP17, 2011), the 'Durban Platform for Enhanced Action' was launched which called for the development of a 'protocol, another legally binding instrument or an agreed outcome with legal force under the Convention' by COP21 in 2015, which would be applicable to all Parties' and be implemented from 2020 (UNFCCC 2012). Notably, it was due to India's 'frenetic solitary' efforts to avoid any 'universally applicable' legally binding instrument that the third option of 'an agreed outcome with legal force' was even included in this mandate (Dubash and Rajamani 2015)^[6]. While India managed to avoid a mandate for a legally binding agreement, the 'Durban Platform for Enhanced Action' did not distinguish between developed and developing countries, despite India's objections. Unlike previous accords, the Durban Platform omitted references to 'equity' and 'CBDR-RC', key UNFCCC principles (Sengupta 2012)^[12].

With the principles of equity and CBDR-RC sidelined under the 'Durban Platform for Enhanced Action', a major agenda for India was to bring back these principles within the paragraphs of the new agreement to be negotiated at Paris (COP21, 2015). At this critical juncture, India made a vigorous effort by bringing Like Minded Developing Countries together and through collective efforts to incorporate the CBDR-RC principle in the new agreement. They repeatedly pushed the agenda of differentiation at successive climate negotiations till the signing of the Paris Agreement. Through the LMDC group, the BASIC group, the G77 and China as well as in its individual capacity, India strongly insisted that the UNFCCC could undergo no revision and the new agreement had to be in compliance with the UNFCCC (Kallbekken, Sælen, and Underdal 2014: 42)^[8]. The formal compromise that was ultimately agreed to in Lima was that the 2015 agreement would reflect the principle of CBDR-RC 'in light of different national circumstances' (UNFCCC 2015). In other words, the Kyoto-based 'top-down' and strictly differentiated regime became

obsolete under the Paris Agreement which provides for a nuanced application of the CBDR-RC principle.

The Paris Agreement, as per Rajamani (2019) contains different forms of differentiation in different issues areas. In other words, differentiation has been tailored to the requirements of each issue area in climate negotiations – mitigation, adaptation, finance, technology, capacity building, and transparency (Rajamani 2016). For example, in the area of mitigation, it provides for self-differentiation based on nationally determined emission reduction targets or commitments (INDCs or Intended Nationally Determined Commitments) where as in the area of transparency, differentiation is tailored to capacities, by providing flexibility to those developing countries 'that need it in the light of their capacities' (Bodansky, Brunnée and Rajamani 2017: 231-8)^[3]. The concerns of developing countries have been met to a limited extent by the expectation that developed nations will take lead in emission reduction. However, it is the area of climate finance and technology transfer where differentiation is more aligned with the UNFCCC. Under the agreement, developed countries are required in mandatory terms to provide financial resources to developing countries in continuation of their existing obligations under the Convention (UNFCCC 2015, Article 9.1). Developed countries are also required to continue to take the lead in mobilising climate finance.

Critical Analysis of India's Approach to Climate Justice

India's role in shaping climate justice around the CBDR-RC principle is widely acknowledged among developing countries. However, India's reluctance to take climate actions despite its growing carbon emissions in the first decade of the 2000s increasingly came under criticism not only from developed nations but also from vulnerable groups of developing countries like groups of small island nations and least developed countries. Notably, the developed nations have always been critical of India and other like-minded developing countries calling them as 'Opportunists', who tend to avoid responsibilities towards addressing climate change in the name of historical responsibility of the North as well as in the name of uplifting its poor masses out of poverty (Lefstad and Paavola 2023)^[10]. Again, following the Copenhagen COP, even many developing countries questioned India's unwillingness to adopt binding targets in the name of climate justice. They found the traditional conception of the CBDR-RC as outdated given its emergence as a leading global economy as well as a major global GHG emitter. While they accepted the role of historical responsibility of the Global North in causing climate change, they also stressed on current and future emissions from large developing countries which was only adding to the global warming. At the Durban COP, Grenada's lead delegate and spokesperson for the island states criticised India by saying that India's position conveyed that 'while they develop, we die' (Black 2011)^[1].

India's advocacy of CBDR-RC principle and its traditional reluctance towards taking climate actions should not mean that India was oblivious towards justice concerns of other countries. In climate negotiations, India has always supported special adaptation provisions for the least developed countries and small island nations who face existential crisis from climate change. Further, India has extended support to the demand of compensation for losses

and damages from climate change impacts. As far as its own emission reduction is concerned, at Copenhagen COP (COP15, 2009), India, in a remarkable shift of its position, accepted voluntary quantified emission reduction targets which demonstrates that it is not oblivious of its responsibilities towards protecting environment and addressing climate change. It shifted from 'per capita emission' to 'per-capita plus' approach thereby signalling its desire to play positive role towards addressing climate change. Furthermore, in the lead up to the Paris Agreement, India announced its emission reduction targets under its Intended Nationally Determined Contributions or INDCs. In addition, India launched global initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA) in 2015 and the Coalition for Disaster Resilience Infrastructure (CDRI) which are aimed at addressing global mitigation and adaptation concerns. Further, taking forward India's tradition of living in harmony with nature, the Government of India launched Mission LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment) in October 2022 as a global mass movement to encourage environmentally responsible lifestyles. It shifts climate action from being only government and industry scale to people centric action, emphasizing that individual choices collectively influence global emissions and resource use. India's role in defending climate justice is undeniable.

Conclusion

The CBDR-RC principle has been the key fulcrum of India's climate diplomacy. Since the beginning of global climate negotiations, India has stood as a champion of the CBDR-RC principle. While it played an extremely active role in shaping the principle around per-capita emissions and historical responsibility of the Global North- something which resonated very well in the initial phase of climate negotiations, its position on historical responsibility contradicted with the emphasis of developed countries on current and future emissions of developing countries and their increasing capabilities. In the second decade of climate negotiations, India had to readjust its traditional stance on CBDR-RC. The acceptance of emission reduction targets by the BASIC countries at Copenhagen heralded in a new meaning of CBDR-RC which was more strongly emphasised in the Paris Agreement which said countries will take actions based on the CBDR-RC principle but in the light of national circumstances.

Despite the shift in the interpretation of the CBDR-RC principle, India's stress on equity and historical responsibility cannot be undermined. India's stress on binary differentiation between developed and developing countries helped the developing world remain unified. Further, while it paved the way for developing countries to pursue economic development, it also facilitated financial and technological support for developing countries. And when its own capabilities got strengthened, it came forward as a responsible climate leader and accepted emission reduction targets. India also helps fellow developing countries with money and technologies through non-UNFCCC platforms. At the same time, it continues to pressurise developed countries to take the lead in global climate change mitigation and support developing countries in their mitigation and adaptation efforts. In any case, the principle of CBDR-RC can be modified but can never be ignored.

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