

## People's Movement in India That Inspired Environmental Change

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### Abstract

Social movements are an indicator of collective activism, and they reflect the need to bring about change in the face of injustice. They contribute greatly to the well-being of democracy; the presence of social movements showcases that there are citizens ready to bring the state's attention to what's right, and work towards improving the nation. India has witnessed a plethora of social movements, while many have been successful, others still continue with people fighting for their rights. In the midst of this all, India has also hosted a fair share of environmental movements, wherein people have been determined to protect the flora and fauna around them. The Chipko Movement, Save Silent Valley Movement, and Narmada Bachao Aandolan are among various others that shaped the future of environmental movements in the country. Every single movement, whether it gained remarkable attention or was a valiant attempt, has shown that there are people willing to fight for India's nature and wildlife.

**Keywords:** *Environment, India, Movement, Social.*

### Introduction

The concern for the present day environmental problems in most of the developing countries like India is of relatively recent origin. Even the recent awareness and concern for environmental protection at the policy level is a donor induced one, and at the grassroots level, it is due to the efforts by individuals and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). In the absence of ground level awareness and concern, environmental aspects have remained more or less peripheral to the contemporary social movements in India. Some of the contemporary movements, however, acquired the status of ecological or environmental movements in retrospect, as these movements have widened their focus from basic survival needs to ecological concerns.<sup>i</sup>

Social movements are an indicator of collective activism, and they reflect the need to bring about change in the face of injustice. M.S.A. Rao defined social movement as a 'sustained collective mobilization through either informal or formal organization or which is generally oriented towards bringing about change'. The environmental movements in India were of special significance in the history of new social movements in India. These movements can be classified as new social movements because of their following characteristics; 1) The movements were addressing novel issues like environmental degradation 2) The movements were massive with the active participation of marginalized groups 3) The demands of the new movements were novel in the sense that it demanded right to livelihood and rights of the

displaced 4) The environmental movements adapted non-violent strategy 5) The movements incorporated hitherto unrepresented sectors of society including adivasies, women and the marginalized. 6) Many of the new environmental movements forced the governments to take affirmative policies in the form of new laws and provisions.<sup>ii</sup>

Since the 1970s, a number of grassroot environmental movements have been organized by the civil society to think of alternative ways to harness natural resources in a way so as to ensure ecological sustainability and social equity in a society. Such movements, in general, have been theorized under the conceptualization of new social movements, and this conception also includes civil right movements, feminist movements, student movements, peace movements for nuclear disarmament, and peasant movements among others. These movements were termed 'new' in order to distinguish them from the 'old' class based labour movements, which had dominated the mobilization for collective action in Western Europe up to the 1960s. The scope of social movements, thus, has been expanded over the time to address the emerging social concerns, and to incorporate the growing diverse facets of collective actions. Amita Baviskar (2010) rightly noted that the emergence of a spectrum of interconnected and multi-stranded social movements around the world helped to evolve the concept of "new social movements"<sup>iii</sup>

The post-independence era has witnessed environmental degradation on an unprecedented scale. Soil erosion, air and water pollution, rapid depletion of forest cover and wild life are just some of the effects of environment degradation. Wrongly conceived plans of urbanization and industrialization have only led to further ecological crisis. As has been pointed out by eminent scholars, that development results in destruction of eco-friendly and traditional means of production, pollution of the environment and subsequently this deprivation of the ecosystem results in the loss of the sources of livelihood of the people. Ecological movements have erupted wherever there have been threats to forests and agriculture lands by inundation, water logging, salinity resulting from the construction of large dams and massive projects like the Tehri Dam, KoelKaro, Sirsi. Sometimes environmental movements may spring from the urge of the forest dwelling communities to save forest from destruction like the Chipko movement and similar movements in Western Ghats, the Aravallis and also the Vindhyas, and also in the tribal belts of India.<sup>iv</sup>

The Chipko movement of the early 1970s was a non-violent and silent protest led by the rural women in Uttarakhand. Their mission was to fight against the merciless cutting down of trees for commercial purposes. The villagers in the area, who were dependent on these trees, were denied access to the lumber they needed for their agricultural and subsistence. However, a large sports company was given access to the same plot of trees to cut arbitrarily. Enraged, the villagers rushed into the forests and hugged the trees to prevent the contractors from axing them down. This tactic spread like wildfire, with locals hugging the trees in their surroundings to prevent deforestation and ban commercial logging. To this day, non-violent yet powerful tactics like this one are used in environmental movements.

The Chipko movement kick-started many environmental movements in India. Further down south, in the Palakkad district of Kerala, an environmental movement by the name of Save Silent Valley Movement unfolded as the Planning Commission approved the building of a dam across the Kunthipuzha River in 1973. The Silent Valley is a moist, evergreen forest that is home to various rare birds, reptiles and mammals. The Kerala People's Science Movement, a group of school teachers and locals who aimed at spreading environmental conservation awareness, brought to light the fact that this dam would only minutely impact the development of the region, and would lead to the loss of various species that thrive there. They questioned if the sacrifice of thousands of years of evolution was worth the minimal benefits it would bring.

Citizens of the country began taking note of developmental projects that might harm the environment. A well-known movement that followed was the Narmada Bachao Aandolan. It was started in 1985 to protest against a number of large dams being built across the Narmada river. This movement was an amalgamation of environmentalists, tribal rights activists and scientists who pointed out various shortcomings of the state's "development" plans. Though the project aimed at providing water to dry parts of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, it required various tribal groups and villagers to be displaced and forest lands to be submerged. Though this movement lasted for a long time and brought more scrutiny to large-scale dam projects and their consequences, the construction of this dam could not be stopped. Medha Patkar and Baba Amte led the movement sparked by those who were going to be directly affected by the ill consequences of the dam. The fight for tribal rights and proper compensation to the people who were unfairly removed from their native land still continues.<sup>v</sup>

During the past twenty years people in various regions of India have formed nonviolent action movements to protect their environment, their livelihood, and their ways of life. These environmental movements have emerged from the Himalayan regions of Uttar Pradesh to the tropical forests of Kerala and from Gujarat to Tripura in response to projects that threaten to dislocate people and to affect their basic human rights to land, water, and ecological stability of life-support systems. They share certain features, such as democratic values and decentralized decision making, with social movements operating in India. The environmental movements are slowly progressing towards defining a model of development to replace the current resource-intensive one that has created severe ecological instability. These environmental movements are an expression of the socio-ecological effects of narrowly conceived development based on short-term criteria of exploitation. The movements are revealing how the resource-intensive demands of development have built-in ecological destruction and economic deprivation. The members have activated micro-action plans to safeguard natural processes and to provide the macro-concept for ecological development at the national and regional levels. Similar grassroots environmental movements are emerging in Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand. Throughout Asia and the Pacific citizenry organizations are working in innovative ways to reclaim their environment.<sup>vi</sup>

While, In the West, the environmental movement had arisen chiefly out of a desire to protect endangered animal species and natural habitats. In India, however, it arose out of the imperative of human survival. This was an environmentalism of the poor, which married the concern of social justice on the one hand with sustainability on the other. It argued that present patterns of resource, use disadvantaged local communities and devastated the natural environment. In the 1980s and 1990s, the finest minds in the environmental movement sought to marry science with sustainability. They sought to design and implement, forest, energy, water and transport policies that would augment economic productivity and human welfare without causing environmental stress. They acted in the knowledge that, unlike the West, India did not have colonies whose resources it could draw upon in its own industrial revolution.<sup>vii</sup>

## Conclusion

The increasing number of environmental movements owes itself to the spread of education. At a global level, some events contributed greatly to environmental awareness, such as the report of the Brundtland Commission titled 'Our Common Future' and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as Earth Summit 1992. These put forth the topic of the environment in a space that had been purely political, and even brought it to mainstream conversation. The contemporary popular movements in India are basically eco-centric rather than pragmatic. Even the Chipko movement, hitherto the most popular movement in terms of local people's (including women) involvement, has failed to carry forward its objective of developing the region and ameliorating the conditions of the local people in the later years. The recent movements are more effective in bringing the conflicts between development and environment to the fore rather than working toward sustainable development (ecological as well as economic). The eco-centric approach may not suit the needs of developing countries, and hence, the approach of these movements in India ought to be different from that of the developed countries. In the absence of basic literacy, the grassroots level awareness and concern for environment is rather low on the priority list. Consequently, environmental concerns, in the absence of any direct linkage with livelihoods, are not germane to the local needs. In fact, they are imposed from above. However, while the popular environmental movements at the macro level appear to be lacking in direction, the achievements of micro level movements in addressing the issues of sustainable development seem to be more tangible. In the absence of environmental awareness among people, influencing the policy may prove to be difficult as the policy making is often influenced by the majority's demands or class interests. Clearly, environment is not on the priority list of the majority populace and certainly not as far as class interests are concerned. Therefore, the efforts of the environmental groups at the policy level may be directed toward bringing in awareness and changing attitudes of the people toward environment which needs some hard policy decisions. Moreover, the environmental groups and the state need to work in tandem in addressing the pressing problem, which in turn, would help in building environmental movements in a holistic and sustainable fashion.<sup>viii</sup>

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