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**A STUDY OF INDIAN ENVIRONMENTAL  
MOVEMENT: A SOCIAL ASPECT**

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# A Study of Indian Environmental Movement: A Social Aspect

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**Abstract – The study of environmental movements has become one of the important discourses in academics and it has a number of aspects. This article investigates the determinant factors of success and failure of environmental movements in India based on a comparative analysis of the colonial regime, post-independence regime, and the more recent era of liberalization. The movements during the 1960s and 1970s were suppressed by the democratic state, because they did not have this kind of support. The factors that were responsible for the success of the environmental movements in the late 1970s and 1980s have not produced as much success in the more recent era of liberalization.**

**After the Stockholm conference held in 1972, governments of almost all the developed and developing countries had showed considerable enthusiasm towards the needs of environmental preservation but their enthusiasm was confined to making further announcements of environmental policies and legislations, and they failed to bring changes on the ground especially because the agenda of economic development was still dominating the governmental discourses. Due to lack of genuine political will, the structural procedures and mechanisms evolved by different governments for maintaining the ecological health thus proved to be insufficient and over time, the limitless and incessant exploitation of natural resources further deteriorated the state of the global environment. This is probably why a number of grassroots environmental movements were organized by the civil society to think of alternative ways to harnessing natural resources in a way so as to ensure ecological sustainability and social equity.**

**Nature-based conflicts have increased in frequency and intensity in India They revolve around competing claims over forests, land, water and fisheries, and have generated a new movement struggling for the rights of victims of ecological degradation The environmental movement has added a new dimension to Indian democracy and civil society It also poses an ideological challenge to the dominant notions of the meaning, content and patterns of development.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Climate change has emerged in the past few years as the environmental problem at the global level, swamping all other environmental issues. Western environmentalists who focus largely on wilderness and biodiversity conservation have adapted easily, by showing how climate change will aggravate the problem of conservation - e.g., loss of polar bears, seals, penguins, or whales.

But this kind of 'climate centrism in the environmental discourse has been problematic for many environmentalists in the global South, as it threatens to divert attention from other more pressing local or regional issues such as water scarcity and pollution, indoor and outdoor air pollution, mining impacts, or solid waste management. Not surprisingly, many Indian environmentalists have been tentative and ambiguous about engaging with climate change, to the extent that this tentativeness has been interpreted in

the North as foot-dragging or even 'hiding behind the poor' (Ananthapadmanabhan et al., 2007). More recently, one sees an upsurge in interest and engagement and the emergence of some new groups and coalitions. Although some are focusing exclusively on climate change, most others are critical of blind engagement and are grappling with how best to integrate the issue into their overall approach to environmentally sound development.

Conflicts over forests and other natural resources have been widespread across human history. During the preindustrial period, conflicts were based for the most part on competing property claims. However, in the industrial era or modern world, conflicts have become sharper against the backdrop of increasing resource use triggered by the capitalist mode of production. The expansion of the resource base in industrial societies has rested upon access to land and natural resources, which were previously controlled by hunter-gatherer and peasant societies.

Industrial societies have given rise to individualism accompanied by a tremendous expansion in the role of the state in regulating individual transactions. The old more flexible systems of customary law are being replaced by state-induced rigid systems of codified laws, which has completely delegitimized community based systems of access to and control of natural resources.

Scientific methods of forests management provide a good illustration of state control and how states have taken over responsibility for forest protection and production. The industrial societies have rejected the hunter-gatherer and agriculturalist view of humans as part of a community of living beings and they have emphatically asserted that they have every right to exploit natural resources for their well-being. The ideology of conquest over nature in the modern world has resulted in a radical change of the natural landscape and as a result there have been clashes between indigenous/tribal peoples and the state system of forest management and resource use.

The huge amount of foreign direct investments (FDIs) in India in the era of liberalization has attracted a large number of industrial and mining projects. Their impacts on the environment and the large-scale displacement and dispossession of the tribals (tribal peoples) from their traditional lands have contributed to an accelerating number of environmental movements in India.

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 are donor-induced and, at the grassroots level, it is due to efforts by individuals and non-governmental organizations (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. In general these movements are often grouped under tribal or peasant movements and also under new social movements. Some even title them as middle class or elitist movements, the reasons being that ecological aspects are linked with the problems associated with peasants and tribals whose survival is attached to the status of natural resources, and that the problems or demands of the tribal as well as non-tribal poor are often articulated by the urban middle class and the elite.

In the context of coalition between the affected people and the middle class spokespersons, the real issues tend to get clouded as the debate is drawn into different forums in order to attract national and international attention.

Environmental movements in India, therefore, are not necessarily for the 'green' or 'clean' earth or for saving mankind's heritage and endangered species as in the West, but for the very survival of the local poor. Even among these ecological movements, only a few can claim success in achieving some of their objectives. On the other hand, the overwhelming popularity or coverage received by some of these movements overshadows the importance of other environmental problems which may be equally, if not more, strident. And the success of the movement is often linked with its popularity rather than the importance of the issue.

Democracy is largely understood as popular sovereignty where people have control over the decision made by the state. Since it is not practically possible for the people in the modern democratic societies to participate in the decision making process of the state directly, they do so through representatives. But when political parties become ineffective in representing the interest of the people, we see the emergence of social movements (SMs). It is a truism that no society is static. Space, processes and nature as well as the direction of social change vary from time to time and society to society. Social movements are nothing new and they are taking place all around the globe, whether, they are based on certain issues or interests, under different institutional environments. In India also social movements have taken place around identity issues or interest based activism. Social movements play an important role in escalating not only the processes of change, but also in giving direction to social transformation. Till the 1960s, sociologists' interest in social movements was largely focused on sanskritisation and socio-religious reform movements, excluding the political dimension as beyond their scope. It is sometimes argued that the freedom of expression, education and relative economic independence prevalent in the modern Western culture are responsible for the unprecedented number and scope of various contemporary social movements. However, others point out that many of the social movements of the last hundred years grew up, like the Mau Mau in Kenya, to oppose Western colonialism. Either way, social movements have been and continued to be closely connected with democratic political systems. Occasionally, social movements have been involved in democratizing nations, but more often they have flourished after democratization.

The United Nations conference on Human Environment, Stockholm, 1972 paved the way for a number of studies and reports on the condition of the environment and its effect on the present and future generations. It expressed concern to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations. The development of 'green politics' or 'eco-greens' or the 'green movement' in Germany and North America in the early 1980s boosted the formation of the 'green network' and the 'green movement' throughout the world, including India. A number of action groups, research institutes, and documentation centers have been established to study

and mobilize public opinion on environmental issues (Spretnak and Capra 1985). By now the material on the environmental situation in general and in certain sectors such as air, land, forest, water, marine resources, etc. has proliferated in different forms from popular literature to 'scientific' studies. Environment provides valuable material not only on various aspects of the environment but also people's resistance and struggles. There are large areas of forests which are inhabited by rare species of animal life. The country is also having many rivers which provides livelihood for a considerable number of people including the Adivasi. However these natural resources were a favorite prey for the vested interests in the state. They exploited the nature without any social concerns. This resulted in larger issues of development and displacement. With the endangered nature the dependent population also faces many threats. Many of these threatened communities were also marginalized groups including the poor and Adivasi. Their inability to fight against the mighty interests also accelerated the environmental exploitation and degradation. 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 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.

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. Ill-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, labor intensive traditional means of production; pollution of the environment and depletion of bio mass; and a result of the above two,

deprivation of the ecosystem results in the loss of the sources of livelihood of the people. The most tragic industrial accident has been the poisoning caused by the leakage of MIC gas in Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh). In mid night of December 2-3, 1984 a catastrophe unfolded itself in the city of Bhopal, when a deadly lethal gas floated over the city causing casualties to thousands of humans and animals and creating unbearable sufferings for those who survived as they developed genetic defects because of MIC gas causing blindness, kidney and liver failure and a variety of chronic diseases. The people of Bhopal still continue to be a vulnerable population as 390 metric tons of poisonous waste lay around the factory area for 25 years awaiting court's decision. Justice has been denied to the victims of tragedy as main culprit Warren Anderson is absconding, and there are no chances of his extradition to India.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS: DEMOCRATIC AND NON-DEMOCRATIC FRAMEWORKS**

Scholars like Robert Paehlke, William M Lafferty and James Meadowcroft among others have argued that the environmental movements including the anti-dam movements deploying the non-violent strategies have proven to be more successful in modifying and reforming the developmental practices in democratic politics as compared to those are cast in an authoritarian world. This is mainly because a democratic political system involving decentralized structures to policy making, it argues, provides much better opportunities to address ecological challenges and evolving environmentally sensitive policies. More specifically, a democratic government, for Lafferty, is appropriate for environmental protection because it provides adequate opportunities to people to participate in the process of decision-making and the environment also "involves the issues on which everyone has some right to be consulted". In a similar vein, Sanjeev Khagram contends that the presence of democratic institutions and practices in such a polity accord much better space and opportunities for social mobilization. He further points out that "the domestic presences of organized and sustained social mobilization as well as the presence of democratic institutions or a significant degree of democratization are critical factor that condition the broader impacts of growing transnational contentious politics..." in terms of transnational environmental struggles against developmental projects including big dam projects (Khagram 2005, p. 20).

In a democratic context, the collective mobilizations of people be very they in the form of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), human right groups and welfare associations have much more autonomy to do their work since a democratic state is based upon the liberal philosophy that believes in the



independent functioning of the civil society. It does not view the functioning of such non-state actors a challenge to its authority and in many cases where the state capacity is weak, it encourages and even augments the strength of such actors to mobilize and organize people for a particular cause. This is perhaps why a greater degree of mobilization of people in terms of environmental movements steered by the NGOs and other grassroots groups is more likely to occur within the democratic framework. In addition, the transnational linkages that strengthen such campaigns by providing global platforms to the domestic collective are also best possible in the democratic situations (Wet 2005, p. 2056).

In contrast, development activities, it argues, like big dams building "are least likely to be altered... in states with authoritarian regimes [because] the domestic actors [such peoples' voluntary groups and NGOs among others] have little or no capacity to generate grassroots resistance". The states authorities in a nondemocratic framework tend to discourage if not prohibit any collective and organized societal actions since such actions are generally viewed to be linked the political opposition and pose a threat to the prevailing political system. Within such structure, the policy-making powers reside with their layer of top leadership and bureaucrats since they do not have to factor in the public opinion in their decision making process, they are hardly any opportunities for the people to organize and mobilize collective actions even when these are for a non-political cause. Hence a democratic structure, from this standpoint, appears more 'open' and 'inclusive' in nature because of its preference to human liberty and rights.

On the other hand, democratic institutions facilitate peaceful collective actions across the entire spectrum of the state and in societal initiatives including the developmental agenda and environmental domain because such organized efforts in a democratic regime are duly recognized by the constitution and the state. In other words, democratic political setups as compare to the authoritarian ones provide much better opportunities to the grassroots groups and vulnerable sections in the society to mobilize public opinion with a variety of tools and platforms such as that of media available to them. Clearly, the greater degree of democratization entails a greater degree of social mobilization within a society upon which the effectiveness of any environmental movement depends. Though it should be noted that the presence of democratic mechanisms and a greater degree of social mobilization are not the only conditions that ensures the success of environment movement, other factors such as energetic leadership, strong ideology, cohesive organizational structure, and so on also play a vital role.

## UNDERSTANDING ENVIRONMENTALISMS

## INDIAN

In analyzing the Indian environmental movement, we may distinguish between its material, political and ideological expressions. The material context is provided by the wide-ranging struggles over natural resources, the theme of this essay's first part. Broadly speaking, these conflicts have set in opposition, on the one side, social groups who have gained disproportionately from economic development whilst being insulated from ecological degradation (in particular, industrialists, urban consumers and rich farmers), and on the other, poorer and relatively powerless groups such as small peasants, pastoral nomads, tribals and fishing communities, whose livelihoods have been seriously undermined through a combination of resource flows biased against them and a growing deterioration of the environment. Our analysis suggests that the origins of these conflicts lie in the process of development itself. While forests, water and other natural resources are diverted to produce energy and commodities for the rich, the poor are made to bear the social and environmental costs of economic development, whether in the form of the declining availability of natural resources, a more polluted environment, or — increasingly — physical displacement.

With these struggles as its backdrop, the political expression of Indian environmentalism has been the organization by social action groups of the victims of environmental degradation. Action groups have embarked upon three distinct, if interrelated, sets of initiatives. First, through a process of organization and struggle they have tried, with varying degrees of success, to prevent ecologically destructive economic practices. Second, they have promoted the environmental message through the skillful use of the media, and more innovatively, via informal means such as walking tours and Eco development camps. Finally, these groups have also taken up programmes of environmental rehabilitation (afforestation, soil conservation, and so on), restoring degraded village ecosystems and thereby enhancing the quality of life of the inhabitants.

Environmental action groups in India have thus utilized a varied and flexible repertoire of protest. These distinctive forms of struggle are, of course, both overlapping and complementary: nor is our list exhaustive: new forms are being created even as we write.

Social action in the three generic modes outlined above (i.e. struggle, publicity and restoration) constitutes the bedrock of the Indian environmental movement. While such activism has characteristically been localized with most groups working within one district — the links between the micro and macro spheres have been made most explicit (recent initiatives like the JVA excepted) through the environmentalists' critique of the ruling ideology of

Indian democracy, that of imitative industrialization. For environmentalists have insistently claimed that the intensification of natural resources conflict is a direct consequence of the resource- and capital-intensive pattern of economic development, modelled on the Western experience, followed since independence. The resource illiteracy of development planning, they claim, is directly responsible for the impoverishment of the resource base and of the millions of rural people who depend on it.

Indian environmentalists have embraced all types of environmentalisms outlined above. The wildlife conservationists, who preceded many others in post-independence India, have focused on saving pristine wilderness to the exclusion of all other concerns, including the justice issues in evicting tribal groups from conservation areas and also the environmental impacts of their own lifestyles. Their analytical perspective has tended to blame population growth (WWF-India, 2010). Another set of activists emerged around various resource and livelihood movements, starting with Chipko. They highlighted state control as the cause, valorising communities as natural conservationists. A third grouping is visible around urban environmental issues such as air pollution in Delhi. This grouping has been somewhat insensitive to issues of social justice (as pointed out by Baviskar, 2011). Sustainability arguments typically seem to come from groups that are more techno-economic, e.g., those arguing for regulation of groundwater use to prevent long-term depletion, or for long-term energy planning.

## **PROTEST MOVEMENTS DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD**

The Indian Forest Act of 1878 was a comprehensive piece of legislation, which allowed the state to expand the commercial exploitation of the forests and it put curbs on local use for subsistence. The denial of forest rights provoked countrywide protests. Several protests and movements were raised against the colonial forestry – in Chota Nagpur in 1893, in Bastar in 1910, in Gudum-Rampa in 1879–1880 and again in 1922–1923, in Midnapur in 1920, and in Adilabad in 1940. These movements were extended to many parts of the country and thousands of villages were involved in this movement, but these movements were put down and suppressed by the armed forces of the colonial government (Guha, 2001, pp. 213–238).

Various organizations raised their voices against the act. In 1878, the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, a nationalist organization in western India vehemently opposed the Forest Act. Although this organization was middle class, it consistently fought for the rights of the cultivators. It argued that the act grossly violated the customary rights of the people, who were very much dependent on the forest economy. The Sabha

not only opposed the Forest Act, which claimed the colonial government took excessive control of the forests, but also offered a more constructive alternative.

It argued that the forests should be maintained by the Indian villagers, if the villagers were rewarded and commended for conserving their patches of forestland, instead of ejecting them from their traditional forestlands. The Sabha advocated a far more democratic structure of forest management than that envisaged by the colonial government.

The movement at first took the shape of labor strikes, which crippled the administration and burned a large area of pine forests. Hundreds and thousands of resin channels were destroyed. The movement got popular support and it was a direct challenge to the colonial government over the forest areas. In the wake of popular protests, a magisterial critique of government forest policy was published by Govind Ballabh Pant, a rising lawyer from a peasant household in Almora. He was one of the great nationalists, who became the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh soon after the independence of India. In his booklet of 1922 (*The Forest Problem of Kumaun*), he logically offered the solution to end the conflict between the forest dependent people and the government.

## **THE POPULAR MOVEMENTS**

The origin of modern environmentalism and environmental movements in India can be ascribed to the Chipko movement in the central Himalayan region in the early 1970s. Chipko movement, launched to protect the Himalayan forests from destruction, has its roots in the pre-Independence days. Many struggles were organised to protest against the colonial forest policy during the early decades of the twentieth century. The main demand of the people in these protests was that the benefits of the forest, especially the right to fodder, should go to local people (Bahuguna, 1990). These struggles have continued in the post-Independence era as the forest policies of independent India are no different from those of the colonial days. However, the origin of Chipko (*chipak jana* - to hug) dates back to the year 1973. In early 1973, the forest department refused to allot ash trees to the Dashauli Gram Swarajya Sangha (DGSS), a local cooperative organisation based in Chamoli district, for making agricultural implements. On the other hand, the forest department allotted ash trees to a private company, i.e., Symonds Company.

This incident provoked the DGSS to fight against this injustice through lying down in front of timber trucks and burning resin and timber depots as was done in the Quit India movement. When these methods were found unsatisfactory, Chandi Prasad Bhat, one of the

leaders, suggested embracing the trees to prevent them from being cut. With its success, the movement has spread to other neighboring areas, and then onwards the movement is popularly known internationally as Chipko movement. Only during the 1970s this, (now Chipko) movement started tending towards concentrating on ecological issues, such as depletion of forest cover and soil erosion.

Chipko movement with its wide following and success, though modest in achieving some of its objects, can be termed as a watershed in environmental movements in India. This, in fact, kindled attention to the environmental aspects of development and gave rise to numerous conflicts and protests over natural resources and ecological issues. However, despite numerous forest-based movements during the last two decades in India, none of them had attracted public support or influenced the state policies as much as Chipko did. This may be attributed to three important aspects of the Chipko movement. First, there is the close link between the livelihoods of the local people and the nature of the movement. The local people consider Chipko as a fight for basic subsistence denied to them by the institutions and policies of the state.

The other popular movements of importance in India, which have environmental protection as one of their objectives, relate to major dams. Notable among them are Tehri Dam, Silent Valley Project and Narmada Valley Project. The longest struggle among the anti-big dam protest struggles was the opposition to Tehri dam, being constructed on the river Bhageerathi in the Garhwal region. The Tehri Baandh Virodhi Sangharsha Samithi (Committee for the Struggle against the

Tehri Dam), founded by veteran freedom fighter Veerendra Datta Saklani, has been opposing the construction for more than a decade. The major objections include, seismic sensitivity of the region, submergence of forest areas along with Tehri town, etc;. Despite the support from other prominent leaders like Sunderlal Bahuguna, the movement has failed to gather enough popular support at national as well as international levels and the government is determined to complete the project. For, according to the latest reports (various daily newspapers during May-June 1995), the construction of the dam is being carried out with police protection as Sunderlal Bahuguna is sitting on fast unto death. After the Prime Minister's assurance to review the project, Bahuguna ended his fast but construction goes on, though at a slower pace.

One of the early and complete successes of environmental movements was the abandonment of the Silent Valley hydro-electric project in Kerala.<sup>1</sup> The movement in relation to the Silent Valley project was organised by the Kerala Shashtra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) in collaboration with wild life conservationists.

## CONCLUSION

This study had set out to interrogate a key supposition of the existing scholarly literatures on the social movements including those who advocate the cause of environmental preservation. It states that these movements stand a better chance of success in a democratic political system as compared to an authoritarian one because democracies provide more, better and systematic avenues to their citizens to participate in the collective decision making processes.

The main findings of this paper yield a qualified response to this query. It shows that while the democratic polity of India undoubtedly allowed people of the Narmada Valley to fully arrange them, seek popular support of the NGOs operating in an independent domain to launch a sustained campaign against the building of the Sardar Sarovar dam, unlike the situation in China. Where authoritarian exercised an iron hand in first of all closely controlling the process of registration of the numbers of NGOs that were allowed to operate in the domestic sphere especially those working in the environmental sector and then in using the might of the state to suppress the dissenting voices and even punishing those who tried to mobilize the people to take part in the anti-dam movement against the Three Gorges Project.

It is important to note that people at all levels of society-government, NGOs, scientists, and citizens often disagree about the best way to use resources in the most efficient, environmentally friendly, and equitable way. Therefore, it is crucial that any environmental movement that seeks to be a people's movement, and aims to become lasting and relevant, must sympathize with the concerns of all of India's poor and disadvantaged. There is no doubt that these movements have yet to play important roles in the preservation of both social and environmental rights within India, but such movements must fully recognize and value the right to development, in tandem with the right to a functional and healthy environment, if they are to meet with success on the public and political levels.

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