

# ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA - A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## Introduction

Environmental movements in the modern science begin in the west. But over the last two decades, it has spread far and wide even in the so called third world. It has already taken deep roots in India consequent on the lethargic approach of the central and state governments and statutory bodies to the environmental problems, local initiatives by the concerned and affected people have come upto fill the gap. Many environmental groups and organisations have been working on various issues in order to give a new direction to the development through the production of environment. There are numerous local protest against land being submerged by dams against pollution of water courses, rivers, lakes and fields against legs being encroached over exploitation of natural resources, deforestation and mining activity harming farming land. Much of these efforts are being aided by a different breed of scientists and academics that identify themselves, with the problems and aspirations of the people and attempt to find the scientific evidence needed to back up these aspirations. These people's movements have come up with solutions and alternate proposals for development. They have played a very important role in creating environmental awareness among the people. The activities of some movements or groups are briefly described in this paper.

## 2. Environmental movements in India

**Bishnois movement:** Bishnois, who can be called the first environmentalist of India, is a community of nature worshippers in the state of Rajasthan in India. The religion was founded by Guru Maharaj Jambaji in 1485 A.D. whose twenty nine principles of living mostly centred on promoting environmental stewardship. The King of Jodhpur wanted to build a new palace. He sent soldiers to gather wood from the forest region near the village of Khejarli, where Bishnoi villagers had helped foster and abundance of Khejri trees. When the King's men began to harm the trees, the Bishnois protested in anguish but where ignored by the soldiers, who were under royal orders. Amrita Devi was a female villager who could not bear to witness the destruction of both her faith and the village's sacred trees. She decided to literally hug the trees, and encouraged others to do so too, proclaiming "a chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree'. Bishnois from Khejri and the nearby villages came to the forest and embraced the trees one by one to protect them from being cut down. As each villager hugged a tree, refusing to let go, they were beheaded by the soldiers. This voluntary martyrdom continued until 363 Bishnoi villagers were killed in the name of the sacred

Khejarli forest. Once word got back to the King about this activity he rushed to the village and apologized, ordering the soldiers to cease logging operations. Soon afterwards, the Maharaja designated the Bishnois state as a protected area, forbidding harm to trees and animals. This legislation still exists today in the region.

**Silent valley movement:** Under silent valley project a hydro-electric dam, was to be built on the Kundapuzha River, in the Palakkad district of Kerala. It was to produce 240 megawatt of power, irrigate 10000 ha of additional agricultural land and provide employment to 2000 to 3000 people. Although the project was conceived in 1963, there was delay in its execution for want of finance. A task force appointed to study the silent valley project and its implications, suggested in its report submitted in 1976, that the project should be shelved and the ecology of the area ought to be preserved. Later on, Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, a non-governmental organisation working on science education, deputed a multi-disciplinary team consisting of a biologist, a nuclear physicist, an electrical engineer, an economist and agricultural scientist, to study the feasibility and impact of this project. According to its report, the project if executed will cause irrevocable damage to the last remnants of the tropical evergreen forests of Western Ghats. Following this adverse report, a nation-wide campaign was launched to save the silent valley. KSSSP spear headed this struggle. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi appointed a committee with M.S.Swaminathan as its head to look into it cost and benefits of the project. On the recommendation of the committee, the project was not given sanction by the Government of India.

**Chipko movement:** Chipko in Hindi meaning "to hug" today evokes the romantic images of poor, village women in the hills of Northern India determinedly hugging trees to prevent them from being cut down by the very axes of forest contractors. This was the first people's movement in India in modern times and was against deforestation in the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand. It was a movement of the poor people in a village to establish the right and control over their own resources. In 1960s, when under a working plan trees were cut on a large scale. This increased the intensity of the 1970 flood in the Alakananda River, which swept away six bridges, 16 foot bridges and 25 buses. In 101 villages 604 houses and 500 acres of crops were destroyed. Roads were blocked. Despite this, exploitation of forest for commercial purposes continued. Chipko movement's first battle took place in April 1973 in a village called Mandal in Chamoli district of the Uttar Pradesh. In March 1974, when the forest department auctioned 680 hectare of forest to fell trees from the catchment area of Alakananda River, the people mainly women, did not allow the axe men even to enter the forest. Under the leadership of Gauri Devi they attacked the wood cutters. The forest guard was tied up and taken into custody. The cutters were forced to run away. These success stories encouraged the people who began to resist the deforestation in an organised manner. The movement spread to other parts of Himalayan Valleys like Bhyunder Valley, Chamchidhar forest, Bhadhyar Ghats, etc. This proved that even illiterate, poor people, when organised, can resist exploitation. It is

the movement that is responsible for the enactment of the Forest Protection Act 1980 and the creation of a separate Ministry for Environment at the Centre.

**Narmada Bachao Andolan:** On the 312 km long Narmada River, government had plan to build some 30 big, 300 medium and 3000 small dams. This is known as the country's largest river valley project. The area to be affected by this project is spread over in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. However the implementation was complicated due to fact that the three states could not agree upon division of project cost and benefits. In 1969, the dispute was referred to the Narmada Water Dispute Tribunal which handed down its award in 1979. The Sardar Sarovar Dam, one component of the entire multipurpose project costing thousand crores, is meant to divert water to users in Gujarat. The Sardar Sarovar project is intended to bring drinking water to Kutch and other drought regions of Gujarat and to irrigate a vast area of the state as well as two districts of Rajasthan. This requires a large reservoir on the Narmada River and an extensive canal and irrigation system. The dam under construction on the Narmada to impound water 2 year full reservoir level of 455 feet will submerge 37000 hectares of land in three states namely, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The impact of the Sardar Sarovar Project extends over a vast area and affects a very large number of people most of whom are tribes. At least one lakh people in 245 villages live in the area affected by submergence. In addition to this there are likely to be 140,000 farmers who will be affected by the canal and irrigation system. Finally there are people living in the down stream below the dam numbering thousands more, whose lives will be significantly affected. In 1985, the World Bank agreed to lend a total of 450 million dollar for this project. In 1991, the World Bank appointed Bradford Morse to organise and independent review of the measures being taken to mitigate the human and environmental impacts of the Sardar Sarovar Project. Finally in 1994, the World Bank pulled out of its commitments to the project. But the Gujarat government exhibited its determination to go ahead with the project. It decided to go to the people to raise funds through the Narmada bonds and emerged triumphant when bonds issued was oversubscribed twice over. The most vociferous among the "anti-dam" groups has been the Narmada Bachao Andolan led by the veteran Gandhian Baba Amte and Medha Patkar. It has put all its efforts to oppose the project. The resistance movement resorted to many drastic actions. Medha Patkar went on a fast unto death against the dam in June 1993 in Bombay. In August 1993, the resistance movement resorted to "Jal Samarpan" i.e. staying in place to get drowned by the surging waters. The movement and protest is still going on.

**National Test Range at Baliapal:** National Test Range was planned by the Government of India to be set up on the coast of Bay of Bengal in 126 villages of Baliapal and Bhogarai block in Balasore district in Orissa, spread over 400 square kilometres. This area is the most fertile landscape in an otherwise backward state like Orissa and is famous for its betel leaves, meat, fish, vegetables, paddy, cashew nuts and many other products. Fearing displacement, villagers launched their protests against the 'National Test Range' project. People's resistance led by Khepanastra Gathi

Birodhi Committee was so strong that for a long period, no government officer could enter the area. The government is offering massive rehabilitation measures including model villages to be set up with 500 square yards for each family free of cost and financial assistance for house construction and building other infrastructure. The entire rehabilitation package costs more than Rs.400 crore. However, the villages were not to be convinced. Basically, the government did not take the people into confidence while planning the range. Also, villagers are unwilling to lose their traditional homes and living environment and established lifestyle. Further, there was no confidence among the people, in the government on fulfilling its promises, in the light of experience elsewhere where such displacement was forced on people. This movement of the people was joined by civil rights activities, sociologists, academics, NGOs and environmentalists. The people have not withdrawn their protests and resistance even an inch. This was one movement which has spontaneity, without any political group or organisation having any role in its initial stages.

**Appiko movement:** The Appiko movement, a revolutionary movement based on environmental conservation in India, was started in the year 1983 by the villages of Balegadde district in Uttar Kannada, an 81 per cent forest covered district in 1950. Declaring this forest district a 'backward area', the government initiated the process of 'development'. The major industries such as a pulp and paper mill, a plywood factory and a chain of hydroelectric dams constructed to harness the rivers sprouted in the area. These industries overexploited the forest resources, and the dams have submerged huge forest and agricultural areas. The forest cover had shrunk to nearly 25 per cent of the district's area by 1980.

With the inspiration from the Chipko movement to save the forests, the movement led by Panduranga Hegde with men, women and children of Salkani in Kalase forest. Furthermore, the activists spread the movement throughout the region to gain momentum by foot marchers in the interior forest slideshows, folk dances, street plays and so on. The movement has achieved a fair amount of success. The state government has banned felling of green trees in some forest areas; only dead, dying and dry trees are felled to meet local requirements.

### 3. Conclusion

The environmental movements are conceived as broad networks of people and organizations engaged in collective action in the pursuit of environmental benefits. Environmental movements are understood to be very diverse and complex, their organizational forms ranging from the highly organized and formally institutionalized to the radically informal, the spatial scope of their activities ranging from the local to the almost global, the nature of their concerns ranging from single issue to the full panoply of global environmental concerns. Such an inclusive conception is consistent with the usage of the term amongst environmental activists themselves and enables us to consider the linkages between the several levels and forms of what activists call 'the environmental movement'. In India especially after 1970s, a large number of environmental movements have emerged.

However, some of the contemporary movements acquired the status of ecological or environmental movements in retrospect as these movements have widened their focus from basic survival needs to ecological concerns.

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