

# Ecological and the Environmental Movement in India

A. Irudaya Lourdu Gladis\*<sup>1</sup>, A. Scarlet<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor of Botany, Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women, (Autonomous), Periyakulam. Theni, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor of Commerce, Jayaraj Annapackiam College for Women, (Autonomous), Periyakulam. Theni, Tamil Nadu, India

## ABSTRACT

The Indian Constitution itself contains provisions for environmental protection. The Directive Principles of State Policy acknowledge the State's responsibility with regard to environmental protection has laid down under Article 48-A of our Constitution that "The State shall endeavor to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country." India faces problems of environmental degradation and lack of governance on matters related to these. The new social movements can be seen as vehicles of cumulative change in the social, economic and political fields. The environmental movement has added a new dimension to Indian democracy and civil society.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Environment, Indian Constitution, Social Movements

## I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary India experiences an almost unrestricted exploitation of resources because of the lure of new consumerist lifestyles. The balance of nature is disrupted. Environmental and ecological movements are among the important examples of the collective actions of several social groups. Protection and recognition of constitutional and democratic rights, which are not defined by law but form an important part of the day to day living of the subaltern masses like the control over their resources, the right of indigenous people to preserve their culture, protection of environment and maintenance of ecological balance are significant concerns of these movements, as they affect the human life to a great extent. It is signified by several movements of people for the protection of their environmental and ecological rights in India, 'eco-greens' or 'green movement' in Germany and North America. In this paper, our focus will be on environmental movements. This has led

to many conflicts in the society. In this article, we discuss the major environmental movements in India.

The environmental movement has grown rapidly over the last three to four decades. It has played a key role in three areas: (i) in creating public awareness about the importance of bringing about a balance between environment and development; (ii) in opposing development projects that are inimical to social and environmental concerns; and (iii) in organizing mode projects that show the way forward towards non-bureaucratic and participatory, community-based natural resource management systems.

## II. AN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

- 1) An environmental movement can be defined as a social or political movement, for the conservation of environment or for the improvement of the state of the environment.

The terms 'green movement' or 'conservation movement' are alternatively used to denote the same.

- 2) The environmental movements favour the sustainable management of natural resources. The movements often stress the protection of the environment via changes in public policy. Many movements are centered on ecology, health and human rights.
- 3) Environmental movements range from the highly organized and formally institutionalized ones to the radically informal activities.
- 4) The spatial scope of various environmental movements ranges from being local to the almost global.

### III. MAJOR ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Some of the major environmental movements in India during the period 1700 to 2000 are the following.

#### A. Bishnoi Movement

**Year:** 1700s

**Place:** Khejarli, Marwar region, Rajasthan state.

**Leaders:** Amrita Devi along with Bishnoi villagers in Khejarli and surrounding villages.

**Aim:** Save sacred trees from being cut down by the king's soldiers for a new palace.

Amrita Devi, a female villager could not bear to witness the destruction of both her faith and the village's sacred trees. She hugged the trees and encouraged others to do the same. 363 Bishnoi villagers were killed in this movement. The Bishnoi tree martyrs were influenced by the teachings of Guru Maharaj Jambaji, who founded the Bishnoi faith in 1485 and set forth principles forbidding harm to trees and animals. The king who came to know about these events rushed to the village and apologized, ordering the soldiers to cease logging operations. Soon afterwards, the maharajah designated the Bishnoi state as a protected area,

forbidding harm to trees and animals. This legislation still exists today in the region.

#### B. Chipko Movement

**Year:** 1973

**Place:** In Chamoli district and later at Tehri-Garhwal district of Uttarakhand.

**Leaders:** Sundarlal Bahuguna, Gaura Devi, Sudesha Devi, Bachni Devi, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Govind Singh Rawat, Dhoom Singh Negi, Shamsher Singh Bisht and Ghanasyam Raturi.

**Aim:** The main objective was to protect the trees on the Himalayan slopes from the axes of contractors of the forest.

Mr. Bahuguna enlightened the villagers by conveying the importance of trees in the environment which checks the erosion of soil, cause rains and provides pure air. The women of Advani village of Tehri-Garhwal tied the sacred thread around trunks of trees and they hugged the trees, hence it was called 'Chipko Movement' or 'hug the tree movement'. The main demand of the people in these protests was that the benefits of the forests (especially the right to fodder) should go to local people. The Chipko movement gathered momentum in 1978 when the women faced police firings and other tortures. The then state Chief Minister, Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna set up a committee to look into the matter, which eventually ruled in favor of the villagers. This became a turning point in the history of eco-development struggles in the region and around the world.

#### C. Save Silent Valley Movement

**Year:** 1978

**Place:** Silent Valley, an evergreen tropical forest in the Palakkad district of Kerala, India.

**Leaders:** The Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) an NGO, and the poet-activist Sughathakumari played an important role in the Silent Valley protests.

**Aim:** In order to protect the Silent Valley, the moist evergreen forest from being destroyed by a hydroelectric project.

The Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) proposed a hydroelectric dam across the Kunthipuzha River that runs through Silent Valley. In February 1973, the Planning Commission approved the project at a cost of about Rs 25 crores. Many feared that the project would submerge 8.3 sq km of untouched moist evergreen forest. Several NGOs strongly opposed the project and urged the government to abandon it. In January 1981, bowing to unrelenting public pressure, Indira Gandhi declared that Silent Valley will be protected. In June 1983 the Center re-examined the issue through a commission chaired by Prof. M.G.K. Menon. In November 1983 the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project was called off. In 1985, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi formally inaugurated the Silent Valley National Park.

#### D. Jungle Bachao Andholan

**Year:** 1982

**Place:** Singhbhum district of Bihar

**Leaders:** The tribals of Singhbhum.

**Aim:** Against governments decision to replace the natural sal forest with Teak.

The tribals of Singhbhum district of Bihar started the protest when the government decided to replace the natural sal forests with the highly-priced teak. This move was called by many as “Greed Game Political Populism”. Later this movement spread to Jharkhand and Orissa.

#### E. Appiko Movement

**Year:** 1983

**Place:** Uttara Kannada and Shimoga districts of Karnataka State

**Leaders:** Appiko’s greatest strengths lie in it being neither driven by a personality nor having been formally institutionalised. However, it does have a facilitator in Pandurang Hegde. He helped launch the movement in 1983.

**Aim:** Against the felling and commercialization of natural forest and the ruin of ancient livelihood.

It can be said that Appiko movement is the southern version of the Chipko movement. The Appiko Movement was locally known as “Appiko Chaluvali”.

The locals embraced the trees which were to be cut by contractors of the forest department. The Appiko movement used various techniques to raise awareness such as foot marches in the interior forest, slide shows, folk dances, street plays etc. The second area of the movement’s work was to promote a forestation on denuded lands. The movement later focused on the rational use of ecosphere through introducing alternative energy resource to reduce pressure on the forest. The movement became a success. The current status of the project is – stopped.

#### F. Narmada Bachao Andholan (NBA)

**Year:** 1985

**Place:** Narmada River, which flows through the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra.

**Leaders:** Medha Patker, Baba Amte, adivasis, farmers, environmentalists and human rights activists.

**Aim:** A social movement against a number of large dams being built across the Narmada River.

The movement first started as a protest for not providing proper rehabilitation and resettlement for the people who have been displaced by the construction of **Sardar Sarovar Dam**. Later on, the movement turned its focus on the preservation of the environment and the eco-systems of the valley. Activists also demanded the height of the dam to be reduced to 88 m from the proposed height of 130m. World Bank withdrew from the project. The environmental issue was taken into court. In October 2000, the Supreme Court gave a judgment approving the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam with a condition that height of the dam could be raised to 90 m. This height is much higher than the 88 m which anti-dam activists demanded, but it is definitely lower than the proposed height of 130 m. The project is now largely financed by the state governments and market borrowings. The project is expected to be fully completed by 2025. Although

not successful, as the dam could not be prevented, the NBA has created an anti-big dam opinion in India and outside. It questioned the paradigm of development. As a democratic movement, it followed the Gandhian way 100 per cent.

#### G. Tehri Dam Conflict

**Year:** 1990

**Place:** Bhagirathi River near Tehri in Uttarakhand.

**Leaders:** Sunderlal Bahuguna

**Aim:** The protest was against the displacement of town inhabitants and environmental consequence of the weak ecosystem.

Tehri dam attracted national attention in the 1980s and the 1990s. 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.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

As for movements in India during immediate post-independence period, most of the environmental movements had been crushed under the weight of dreams of a young post-colonial nation-state which was on a nation-building mission. However, since the mid-1970s, several movements began to succeed such as the Chipko movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan movement and Silent Valley movement, when they were supported by several organizations of human rights, national and international, environmental groups, NGOs and activists.

Arriving in the current era of liberalization since the 1990s, a large number of demonstrations and environmental movements have taken place all over India. Most movements are focusing on industrial and mining sectors, which have received much foreign investment and have placed a huge impact on the natural environment, where livelihoods of tribal people are at stake. Although almost all environmental groups have received substantial

support from national and international, environmental groups, NGOs and activists, only some of these movements have had no success.

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