
An Analysis of New Social Movements in India: An Environmental Movements Perspective

Bimal Kumar Dutta ^{1*}

^{1*} Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Ramananda College, Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal, India. E-mail: bimalramsagar@rediffmail.com

Abstract

The study of social movements has become increasingly popular over the past half-century. Social scientists have made earnest attempts to reframe social movements from a more analytical and critical vantage point. Many of the features in these social movements have been discovered, and previously overlooked issues have been brought to light. The New Social Movement was a pivotal event in the 1960s. The second half of the 20th century was marked by environmental movements. Some instances of such movements are mentioned, including the Chipko movement in the Himalayas, the Save the Narmada movement in the centre of the country, and the Silent Valley movement in the Malabar region of southern India.

KEYWORDS: Social Movements, Environment, Environmental Movements

INTRODUCTION

A social movement occurs when a segment of the population, motivated by an idea or belief, takes the initiative to effect social change or sustain the existing system through collective leadership in a concentrated effort. People have made a lot of changes to society through their own efforts and by working together. These kinds of efforts have been called "social movements."

So, a social movement can be defined as a group of people who act together in a consistent way to promote or stop a change in the society or group they are a part of. Therefore, a social movement is an organized group's attempt to affect social change. It is possible for a social movement to be formed in order to oppose a proposed alteration. While the goal of some social movements may be to alter only a small part of the current social order, the ultimate objective of others may be to entirely transform it. Reform movements seek to improve existing systems, whereas revolutionary movements seek to alter the status quo.

The study of social movements has become increasingly popular over the past half-century, particularly in the wake of numerous protest movements, including the Black Civil Rights Movement in the West in the 1950s and 1960s, student movements in the 1960s and 1970s, Women's Movement, anti-nuclear protests, homosexual rights,

animal rights, minority nationalism, environmental rights, etc.; ethnic movements in the 1970s, and so on.ⁱ Social scientists have made earnest attempts to reframe social movements from a more analytical and critical vantage point. Many of the features in these social movements have been discovered, and in other cases, previously overlooked issues have been brought to light in fresh contexts, all as part of this endeavour to challenge the dominant frameworks of analysis. As a result, the social movement gradually began to take on new dimensions and developed new social movements.

The New Social Movement was a pivotal event in the 1960s. There is no way to define new social movements. However, the new social movement might be considered the predecessor of the new society. New social movements are movements that emerged in the 1960s or 1970s that were separate from prior labour movements. The new social movement is not founded on class, but rather on social issues. This is primarily a humanist, cultural, and non-materialist movement. This movement addresses issues that affect all people, regardless of class, community, caste, or gender. This movement raises a number of questions concerning lifestyle, identity, and so forth. Peace movements, disarmament movements, feminist movements, environmental movements, and so on are examples of these movements.

These new forms of collective action social movements are characterized by their members as being non-violent, pragmatic, integrated, non-hierarchical, non-coercive, apolitical, age-diverse, and from a wide range of socioeconomic and ideological backgrounds. According to Larana, Johnston, and Guesfield (1994), we can learn more about contemporary social movements by comparing and contrasting them with class-based uprisings of the past across cultures. The following are some of the characteristics they identify in this new social movement:

- a) The participants in the new social movement generally have amorphous social statuses, such as those of youth, students, women, minorities, professional groups, etc., so their structural roles are unclear.
- b) The ideologies put forward by these movements were in stark contrast to the Marxist philosophy of the working class movement. It is not easy to classify contemporary social movements as either conservative or liberal, right or left, capitalist or socialist. There is a diversity of thought and value in these movements.
- c) Symbolic and cultural identities are more closely tied to mobilizations than economic concerns.
- d) Participation in these movements involves a nuanced blend of individual and group assertions of self. In fact, in these movements, the line between the individual and the group is increasingly hazy.
- e) These shifts concern the private and intimate facets of human life, such as how people eat, dress, enjoy, and love.

- f) The most common forms of collective mobilization to challenge dominant norm of conduct are those that do not resort to violence or civil disobedience, etc.
- g) The credibility crisis facing traditional channels for political engagement is directly responsible for the emergence of these movements.
- h) The modern social movements are diffuse and decentralised.ⁱⁱ

In the context of the above discussion of new social movements, we shall now attempt to examine the environmental movements in India. We will concentrate on environmental and ecological movements. While peasant and working-class movements have a long history, environmental and ecological movements only attracted widespread notice in the second part of the twentieth century. These movements are concerned not only with basic survival difficulties, but also with bigger environmental concerns. These are distinct from previous social movements, and it is necessary to comprehend their characteristics and techniques. Scholars have attempted to comprehend and analyse these movements in a variety of ways. In general, these movements are classified as tribal and peasant movements, as well as new social movements. This is because ecological issues are commonly connected with peasants and tribals, whose survival is linked to the state of natural resources such as forests and water. Some consider them middle-class or elite movements, owing to the fact that the problems and concerns of local communities, indigenous people, and non-tribal poor are often articulated by the urban middle-class elite. In fact, India has had no single coherent and homogeneous environmental discourse. There have been what Ramchandra Guha refers to as "varieties of environmentalism."ⁱⁱⁱ

The term "environmental movement" refers to a social movement characterized by the participation of a diverse array of individuals, groups, and coalitions who share a concern for the environment and work together to effect positive change in environmental policy and practice. The environmental or ecological movements of the last few decades are prime examples of the power of organisations working together to effect positive change in society. It is possible to classify these movements as new social movements due to the following features:

1. The movements were addressing new issues, such as environmental degradation.
2. Minority groups played an integral role in the large scale of the movements.
3. The new movements' demands were innovative since they focused on issues such as the right to livelihood and the rights of the displaced.
4. The fourth point is that the environmental movements adopted a peaceful approach.
5. Women, people from marginalised groups, and members of indigenous communities were welcomed into the movements.
6. Numerous contemporary environmental movements have prompted governments to enact affirmative policies in the form of brand-new regulations and laws.

MAJOR ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Chipko Movement:

The Chipko movement was the most effective and well-known environmental movement in India, and it became known around the world. The movement's name, "Chipko," comes from the Hindi word for "embrace." People in the area call it "Angwal." People think that the villagers hugged or stuck to the trees in the forest to keep the contractors from cutting them down. At a meeting in the Mandal on April 1, 1973, Chandi Prasad Bhatt came up with the idea of "embracing" the trees to stop them from being cut down. The Chipko movement brought the environmental problems of the Alaknanda catchment area in the middle of the Western Himalayas to the world's attention.^{iv} In the 1970s, it was started by the well-known environmentalist Sunderlal Bahuguna to protect the dense forests of the western Himalaya Range. This movement was mostly a group of people who didn't want trees to be cut down. In the Alkanand River catchment area, there were often floods because trees were cut down for development projects like building roads, river dams, etc. But the original "Chipko movement" was started by the Bishnoi community in Rajasthan around 260 years ago, at the beginning of the 18th century. A large group of them from 84 villages, led by a woman named Amrita Devi, gave their lives to stop the Maharaja (King) of Jodhpur from cutting down the trees. After this happened, the maharaja made a strong royal order that no one in any Bishnoi village could cut down trees.

The Chipko protests in Uttar Pradesh won a big victory in 1980 when Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who was Prime Minister of India at the time, banned green felling in the Himalayan forests of that state for 15 years. Since then, the movement has grown and spread to many states. In addition to the 15-year ban in Uttar Pradesh, the movement has stopped trees from being cut down in the Western Ghats and the Vindhya. It has also put pressure on the government to create a policy for natural resources that takes into account people's needs and the needs of the environment. Some other people have joined this movement and given it the right direction. The Gandhian activist and philosopher, Mr. Sunderlal Bahuguna, asked Mrs. Indira Gandhi to stop cutting down green trees.

Another leader of the Chipko movement is Mr. Chandi Prasad Bhatt. He pushed for the growth of local businesses based on the conservation and long-term use of forest wealth for the benefit of local people. All of this was terrible for the forests and the environment of the area as a whole. Cutting down trees and rolling them down hills made the top soil loose, which made it wash away more when it rained. This had a terrible effect, and in July 1970, the Alaknanda River flooded, which caused a lot of

damage in the upper catchment area. Reddy (1998) said, "The Forest Department gave ash trees to a private company in early 1973. This caused the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Sangha (DGSS), a local cooperative group, to take action against this unfairness by lying down in front of timber trucks and setting fire to resin and timber depots, just like people did during the Quit India Movement. When these ideas didn't work, one of the leaders, Chandi Prasad Bhat, suggested hugging the trees to keep them from being cut down. Because of its success, the movement has spread to other areas nearby, and it is now known around the world as the Chipko movement."^v

The Chipko movement quickly gained prominence as an environmental movement in the remote Himalayas. The following are the primary characteristics of this movement:

- This movement is a perfect illustration of ecofeminism. This was mostly a women's movement led by women.
- The most crucial aspect of this movement is that it is entirely spontaneous and made by ordinary people. Ordinary women instinctively jumped into the cause of conserving the forest in this movement.
- There was no institutional structure or organizational aspect to the movement. No political party stepped forward to lead this campaign or organise the general public. Rather, ordinary people join this movement voluntarily.
- This was an entirely peaceful movement. The agitators did not respond to any external stimuli. In most cases, they advance the movement by satyagraha, fasting till death, Rakhi Bandhan, and other means.

The Silent Valley Movement:

The "Silent Valley" is a densely forested valley in Kerala's Palghat district. On one side, there is Palghat, while on the other, there is Kozhikode. The Kannadipuzha River runs along the valley's north-south side. The entire neighborhood is calm and quiet. As a result, it is known as "Silent Valley."^{vi}

The Kerala government initiated a programme in 1963 to construct a reservoir for hydropower and irrigation in that valley. The project was authorised by India's Planning Commission in 1973. The felling of trees in the relevant areas has begun as a first step in implementing the project. No one complained at first. However, in 1976, some environmentalists became concerned about the issue and highlighted the potential environmental impact. Locals gradually became aware of this and organised a strong opposition. A task force was formed by the National Planning on Environment and Co-ordination to investigate the situation. This task team was constituted under the supervision of World Wide Fund India's Vice President (W.W.F.India). The task force protested the degradation of this ancient woodland and hydroelectric projects in its 1977 report. Despite these objections, the anti-project movement grows in scale as the government moves forward with the project's implementation.

The most important role in strengthening the Silent Valley movement was provided by the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP).^{vii} It is Kerala's largest eco-conscious anthropology group. Its mission is to raise environmental awareness and scientific literacy among rural residents. The KSSP contends that if the proposed reservoir construction plan is completed, the area's evergreen forest resources would be lost, numerous unique wildlife species will be wiped out, breeding of various migratory fishes will be inhibited, and the region's natural balance will be disturbed. The KSSP spreads its message to the general public through the printing of booklets, the organisation of public meetings, the collection of public signatures, and other means.

Encouraged by the KSSP's protest role, several public and private groups performed surveys in the respective areas, including the Zoological Survey of India, the Botanical Survey of India, the Bombay Natural Society (NGO), and others.^{viii} There was no fundamental disagreement between the KSSP's comments and what was stated in these organisations' findings.

Despite these reports or assertions, the Kerala State Legislative Assembly voted a motion to expedite the implementation of the planned system. Morarji Desai, India's then-prime minister, ordered the project's prompt implementation in May 1979.

Several organizations and environmentalists protested when the Kerala government decided to begin work in accordance with this direction. International organisations such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources pressed the Kerala government to abandon the project.

In 1980, the Kerala government formed another inquiry committee, this time led by M.G.K. Menon. In 1982, the committee submitted its report. This assessment also recommends that the project be cancelled. Finally, the Kerala government cancelled the project in 1983 while also announcing plans to develop the area as a national park.

Narmada Bachao Andolan:

The Narmada is one of India's most important rivers. It comes from Mahakal Hill in Amarkantak, which is in the state of Madhya Pradesh. After travelling about 1500 km, the river flows into the Arabian Sea near Bharana in Gujarat.^{ix} The river flows sometimes through hilly, forested areas and sometimes through flat, fertile areas. Several tribal groups live in the hilly valleys of the river. In 1979, the Indian government adopted a plan called the "Narmada Valley Development Project" which was meant to improve the whole valley. On this river, it is thought that 30 big dams, 185 medium dams, and 3,000 small dams will be built. These dams will generate hydroelectric power and give farmers water for farming. There will be two big dams. One is in Gujarat and the other is in Madhya Pradesh. The name of the first one will be "Sardar

Sarobar," and the name of the second one will be "Narmada Sagar'. There will be a total cost of Rs 25,000 crore.^x

There were a lot of protests from the public against this project. Narmada Bachao is the name of the group that is against the project. The movement is led by Medha Patkar and Baba Amte . Activists say that the project is the largest planned project to hurt the environment anywhere in the world. Because of this project, water will cover 243 villages and 3 million hectares of forest land. During the monsoons, when the dam holds back too much water, it will flood the river chest. There will be a lot of damage done to forest resources and native plants. If this project goes forward, it will upset the natural balance of the environment. Also, many poor farmers and tribal people will have to leave their homes because of the environment. At least one million people will lose their land, homes, and ways of making a living. The relationship between tribes and forests is unique. They need things from the forest to stay alive. Their gods and goddesses and the things they do to honour them are all over the forest. If forest resources are lost, it will hurt them the most. Since the beginning of time, people have lived in this area and built a culture there. The Department of Environment and Forests did a study that says if the Sardar project goes forward, Rs 8,190 crores will be lost. And about 31,000 crore will be lost on the Narmada Sagar project.

The Narmada Valley Development Project was put into place in 1979, as has already been said. The World Bank gave this project a loan of 450 million dollars. But because of the Narmada Bachao movement, the project did not move forward very far. The activists not only told the people of the country about the bad parts of the project, but they also got people around the world to pay attention. Because so many people were against the project, the The World Bank set up a "Review Commission" to look at the project's pros and cons as a whole. In April 1993, the World Bank pulled its loan proposal for the project after this committee told them to do so. With good reason, this decision by the World Bank has slowed down some of the work on the Narmada project. But because the government was not willing to change, the project went on as usual. As part of the project work, forced evictions, cutting down trees, etc., are still going on. As a form of protest, the movement grew stronger.

In 1997, because of the stress of the situation, the Indian government decided to stop working on the project for a while. The plan to build a dam on the Narmada river will be looked at again, the government said. The movement did not stop, though. Because if this project goes forward, the poor farmers in tribal communities will lose out. On the other hand, this project is likely to be very good for the wealthy farmers and builders. So, this last group of people has come down against the counter-movement and in favour of building the project. So, the Narmada Save Movement is no longer just a movement to protect the environment; it has become a political fight.

CONCLUSION

Environmental and ecological movements have gained prominence in India during the 1970s, as they have everywhere. These movements' issues are not limited to any particular group. They include the entire village and urban communities; women; tribals; peasants; the middle class; and nature. Even the concerns they raise affect all segments of society to differing degrees. These include the protection of the right of people to access natural resources; the prevention of land degradation; the prevention of the commercialisation of natural resources and environmental pollution; the maintenance of ecological equilibrium, and the rehabilitation of displaced people, among others. These issues are also related to the dignity of people, their environmental rights, and their right to participate in decision-making regarding matters that affect them.

Following independence, the state, in partnership with donor agencies, disrupted the natural equilibrium of society. Consequently, this had a negative impact on the population. The latter launched the environmental and ecological movements through their leadership, NGOs, and other organizations of civil society. These movements have succeeded in raising the degree of awareness among the populace. They constitute an essential part of democracy in India.

REFERENCES:

- ⁱ Morris, A. (2019). *Social movement theory: Lessons from the sociology of WEB Du Bois. Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 24(2), 125-136.
- ⁱⁱ Buechler, S. M. (1995). *New social movement theories. Sociological Quarterly*, 36(3), 441-464.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Guha, R., & Alier, J. M. (2013). *Varieties of environmentalism: essays North and South. Routledge.*
- ^{iv} Santra, S. C. (2000): *Environmental Science, New Central Book Agency, Kolkata.*
- ^v Reddy, Ratna V. (October-December, 1998): 'Environmental Movements in India: Some Reflections', *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 685-695.
- ^{vi} Sheth, P. N. (1997). *Environmentalism: Politics, Ecology, and Development.* Rawat Publications.
- ^{vii} Gurusamy, S., & Basil, P. V. (2021). *People's Movement Against Ecological Conservation Policies in the Western Ghats: Reflections from Kerala, India. In Environment, Development and Sustainability in India: Perspectives, Issues, and Alternatives (pp. 191-210). Springer, Singapore.*
- ^{viii} Nepal, Padam (2009): *Environmental Movements in India: Politics of Dynamism and Transformations, Authorspress, Delhi.*
- ^{ix} Kothari, A., & Bhartari, R. (1984). *Narmada valley project: development or destruction?. Economic and Political Weekly*, 907-920.
- ^x Thakkar, H. (1993). *Can Sardar Sarovar Project Ever Be Financed?. Economic and Political Weekly*, 2262-2264.