

Waves of Resistance: Environmental Movements Throughout India and Their Effects on Policies as well as Societies



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Long ago, in a tiny Indian village between rivers and forests, the children were told by their elders, "*The trees are your ancestors, the rivers your siblings, the land your mother.*" The villagers lived in harmony with nature, relying on her abundance but respecting her. One day, when outsiders arrived to cut down the old trees to sell as timber, the villagers blocked the way before the trees, standing over them and shielding them with their bodies. "*Would you hurt your own children?*" they cried. For them, nature was family — and when family is in danger, protection becomes automatic. This Deep-rooted connection is at the centre of India's green movements. When rivers are dammed, forests cut down, and mountains dug up, it is not just ecosystems that are under assault — it is the lives, cultures, and futures of people that are at risk. Saving nature has been, and remains, an act of love, responsibility, and militant resistance.

"The Earth does not belong to us: we belong to the Earth." By Chief Seattle. This philosophy has driven numerous environmental fights around India, making ordinary people into planet warriors.

Roots of Green Resistance: The Timeline

Environmental awareness in India goes deep and historic, but orderly environmental movements found traction only during the post-independence era. Industrialization with a breakneck pace provided economic growth, while it brought on ecological destruction on a massive level. Forests were cleared out, rivers were polluted, mountains were dug, and native groups were displaced without permission or sometimes even compensation. This called for the emergence of great people's movements, whereby the marginalized and the concerned mobilized into streets to protect their homes, their lands, and their future generations.



The Bishnoi Movement (1730)- The Earliest Green Warriors:

- The earliest whispers of organized resistance date back to 1730, when the Bishnoi people of Rajasthan educated the world in an early-teaching lesson in eco-activism. In the village of Khejarli, over 350 Bishnoi individuals, headed by Amrita Devi, laid down their lives to protect sacred Khejri trees from being cut down by the king's men. Their slogan, "*A chopped head is cheaper than a chopped tree*," still resonates today.

The Chipko Movement (1973) - Hugging Trees to Save Them:

- Skip to the early 1970s, when India saw the landmark Chipko Movement in Uttarakhand's Himalayan range. In 1973, in the face of impending wholesale felling, local villagers, and especially women spearheaded by Gaura Devi and following Sunderlal Bahuguna, who was an environmentalist, wrapped their arms around trees to prevent contractors from felling them. This peaceful form of protest not only preserved numerous forests but also kindled a countrywide awareness regarding forest conservation. The Chipko spirit soon spread, affecting government policy and the passing of the Forest Conservation Act of 1980.

Silent Valley Movement (1978) - Science Meets Activism:

- At approximately the same time, another movement churned in the south. The Silent Valley Movement in the Indian state of Kerala began in 1978 to oppose a hydroelectric power scheme that threatened to destroy part of India's last remaining island of tropical rainforest. It involved scientists, green activists, poets, and local people forming a coalition of activists to campaign on behalf of the Silent Valley. Their perseverance paid off and the Silent Valley National Park came into being in 1984

and precedent was established for science-based ecological activism.

The Appiko Movement (1983) - Southern India's Green Rebellion:

- The 1980s also witnessed the rise of the Appiko Movement in Karnataka's Western Ghats. Chipko-inspired, villagers hugged trees to stop deforestation for commercial timber. The Appiko Movement was not just about saving trees—it was about protecting an entire way of life that was closely linked to the forest ecosystems. Its success inspired broader public involvement in forest conservation and environmental education throughout southern India.

Narmada Bachao Andolan (1985)- Fight for Rivers and Rights:

- The longest and most consequential movement has been the Narmada Bachao Andolan that started in 1985 with Medha Patkar as the leader. It was against the building of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River, the large-scale displacement of tribal and agricultural communities, and the drowning of fertile farmland. The Andolan opposed the development paradigm of the state that sought to prioritize infrastructure over human rights and environmentalism. Despite state repression, the movement succeeded in focusing international concern on the pain of the displaced and the cost to the environment of large dams.



(Source: Indian Express)

Save Niyamgiri Movement (2003–2013)—Defending Sacred Hills: - In Odisha, from 2003 to 2013, the Save Niyamgiri Movement was an ongoing process, led by the Dongria Kondh tribe. When a multinational company suggested it would mine the sacred Niyamgiri hills for bauxite, the tribe resisted vigorously, guarding their ancestral land. Their strong refusal, supported by greens and activists across India, led the Supreme Court to state that tribal village councils had a right to reject the mine project, a victory for indigenous people and environmentalists.

Recent Environmental Protests: - Over the past few years, agitations such as the Anti-Sterlite protest in Tamil Nadu in 2018, the Aarey Forest protest in Mumbai in 2019, and the Save Mollem movement in Goa since 2020 have demonstrated that green activism is alive and evolving. Each protest, although based on local issues, is part of a broader national and even international struggle against unsustainable industrialization, pollution, and climate change.



(Source: Citizen Matters)

Transforming Policy, Society, and the National Consciousness

The impact of these movements on India's policy has been significant. Activism has resulted in the making of key environmental legislation including the Forest Conservation Act (1980), the Environment Protection Act (1986), the Biological Diversity Act (2002), and the Forest Rights Act (2006). These acts have given a legal context to the protection of forests, control of industry, conservation of biodiversity, and recognition of the rights of local communities.

The judiciary too has been impacted heavily. Public Interest Litigations (PILs) have turned out to be a strong means of environmental protection, enabling citizens and NGOs to challenge ecologically damaging projects in the courts of law. 'Polluter Pays' and 'Precautionary Principle' have been woven into Indian environmental jurisprudence, leading to the setting up of the National Green Tribunal in 2010, a special tribunal to address environmental disputes.

Other than laws and policies, the movements have impacted Indian society in its entirety. There has been considerable augmentation of environmental awareness. Environmental education has become mandatory in schools, and ecological issues are increasingly reported on by the media. The movements have empowered marginalized groups, particularly women and tribals, and given them a platform from which to assert their rights and education. They have been critical of prevailing development paradigms, feeling that economic development need not be at the cost of environmental degradation and human misery.

However, the path has not been without challenges. Activists have been subjected to repeated state violence, repression, and criminal prosecution. Movements have sometimes been marred by internal division and disorganization. Powerful corporations have otherwise co-opted environmental struggles for their purposes. The high-wire balancing between environmental conservation and economic development remains precarious and controversial.

In spite of these challenges, India's environmental challenges have left an irreversible mark on the awareness of the nation. They have shown that development is not only gauged in terms of GDP but also by the well-being of rivers, the integrity of ancient forests, and the self-respect of its poorest. They have shown that nature can be safeguarded, it is not a privilege—it is a matter of survival.

Now, as the world struggles to meet the fast-emerging climate crisis, India's environmental resistance legacy is rich in lessons. It reminds us that development must be based on respect for the Earth, that there is a price to be paid for each tree that is felled and each river that is dammed, and that the strongest defenders of the planet are usually the most vulnerable groups. The Long history of India's green movements is a story of hope, resistance, and love. It is the story of individuals who view rivers, forests, and mountains as not resources to be plundered, but living relatives to be defended. As a mother would defend a child from injury, these earth warriors have resisted bulldozers, corporations, and governments with valour. They have shown us that to conserve nature is to conserve ourselves—to safeguard today, and generations as yet unborn.

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