

AMOGHVARTA

ISSN : 2583-3189



Forest Dwellers Movements and environmental Justice in India: An Analytical Overview

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Author

Abhay Kumar
Research Scholar
Department of Law
University of Allahabad
Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, INDIA

Abstract

To understand how indigenous rights, environmental preservation, and social justice intersect, this study examines the Forest Dwellers' movements and campaigns for environmental justice in India. Starting with a historical background, it traces the development of forest administration from colonial times to the present day, pinpointing the impact of colonial and post-independence policies on relations between forest dwellers and the Government. It then devotes its focus to key movements that were crucial for environmental justice: Chipko Movement and Narmada BachaoAndolan. The study looks at these movements' social as well as environmental consequences, showing how they support sustainable development and empower marginalized communities. It contends that these movements have played an important role in shifting public perception towards a development

model that balances social justice with ecological sustainability. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of indigenous knowledge in conserving biodiversity and integrating such knowledge into environmental governance. Ultimately, the study concludes by saying that without support from the Forest Dwellers' movements for a more inclusive and sustainable environmental governance model in India one that tackles past injustices we can't expect ecologically-just human development initiatives to take hold.

Key Words

Forest Dwellers Movement, Environmental Justice, Movements, Forest, Sustainable Development.

History

India's historical background of colonialism and the post-independence policy developments provide the foundation of the historical framework of environmental justice movements and movements of the Forest Dwellers. Analysing the historical movements is crucial in order to grasp the current dynamics of these movements.

a) **British period: 1858–1947**

During British rule over India, forests were seen primarily as strategic reserves and a source of revenue¹. The Britishers during their rule introduced many forest regulations that changed traditional methods of managing forests. The Indian Forest Act of 1927 is the most significant enactments. It played significant role in centralizing

forest management. It designated forests as Government property and restricted the local communities access to the forest produce. The act undermined the customs and cultural practices of forest-dwelling communities and left them powerless.

The colonial Government actively promoted the use of natural resources for commercial purposes, especially timber extraction, which was necessary to cater to the needs British businesses and infrastructural projects (such as railroads). In general, this period saw a decline in traditional sustainable forest management techniques used by local populations, causing serious ecological degradation.

The degradation of forest during the colonial regimes lead to early small-scale resistance movements against colonial forest policies by the communities living in the forest. These movements were often crushed violently by colonial Government. These initial movements set a foundation for future environmental justice movements.

b) Post-Independence Period

After Independence, the Indian Government took over the colonial legal system and largely continued with the centralization of forest administration. While Governments have become increasingly nationalistic in their approaches to resource management, indigenous forest dweller's rights and interests have often been ignored. The forests came to be seen more and more in terms of the development of the country rather than as a resource that provided for local people's needs. Large-scale projects like mines, dams, and industries led to deforestation and eviction of forest populations². This approach combined an emphasis on economic growth at all costs with a stress on state control over resources and resulted in increasing conflicts between forest-dependent communities and conservation authorities.

In 1980, India was experiencing environmental awareness which resonated globally. Forest-based environmental movements that highlighted both the rights of communities dependent on forests and their ecological role began to emerge during this period. These movements were instrumental in pushing for policy reforms by challenging the mainstream paradigm of forest management. In 1980 the Forest (Conservation) Act was passed which for the first time focused on conservation rather than just using it as a means of revenue source.

The history of forest dweller movements in India stretches from colonial period of exploitation to post-independence struggles for recognition and rights. Even after Independence, forest policies continued to reflect the bureaucracy and commercial exploitation that had been established by colonial forests. Early resistance against British practices laid seeds for later more organized environmental justice movements. The developmental approach followed by Independent India also negatively impacted local communities' rights and livelihoods leading to ecological degradation along with social injustice. By 1970-80s onwards there was increased awareness about environment-related issues leading to emergence of movements demanding incorporation of indigenous rights in natural resource governance. This historical context is crucial for understanding current status as it shows long-term confrontation between state-controlled resource management systems versus indigenous/local population's rights-centric systems.

Campaigns and Movements

In India many important campaigns and movements related to environmental justice and the rights of forest dwellers were made which led to reform in forest policy of India. These movements have been instrumental in shaping the discourse around social justice, environmental conservation, and indigenous rights in the country. They have also played a crucial role in challenging prevailing laws that threaten the survival of communities dependent on forests. Some of the important campaigns and movements are as under:

a)³

The Chipko Movement is one among the most popular movements in the history of social and environmental activism. It was a non-violent movement began in the early seventies in the state of Uttarakhand (then part of Uttar Pradesh). The term "Chipko" means "to clasp" or "to stick," it reflects activists' main

strategy, that is, embracing trees to prevent them from cutting. It was initiated primarily by locals whose livelihoods depended heavily on forests for their basic needs.

Chipko movement can be considered as a result of rural people anger about Government policies restricting local access to forest resources, the commercial logging operations handed over by Government to private contractors made it worse. Many people lost their means of subsistence because these operations put their very existence at risk, while also causing significant soil erosion and decreasing water availability.

The movement came into prominence with a protest by peasant women led by activists such as Chandi Prasad Bhatt⁴ and Sunderlal Bahuguna⁵. They hug the trees that were marked for felling down in 1973 at Mandal village in upper Alakananda valley. This mode of movement was based on Gandhian principle of non-violence, this method quickly spread across large parts of India, capturing national and international imagination.

Sunderlal Bahugunais considered as emblematic figure of the movement. He himself travelled extensively, not just to mobilize support but also to educate villagers about ecological importance of trees; his efforts raised awareness about the rights of local communities and forest conservation.

The Chipko Movement had several important impacts:

- (i) It resulted in a ban on felling trees in the Himalayan regions of Uttar Pradesh by 1980⁶.
- (ii) It spread ecological awareness among people. The movement also highlighted the importance of forests for ecological security and maintaining rural livelihoods.
- (iii) Chipko was one of India's earliest environmental movements where women played a significant role. It highlighted the gender issues in environmental activism.
- (iv) Chipko inspired similar movements across other parts of globe, becoming an emblem for non-violent resistance⁷. For instance, in Karnataka's Appiko Movement was initiated where people clung onto trees to protect them from commercial logging. Its philosophy further shaped international campaigns aimed at conserving forests and including locals in such work.

The Chipko Movement is more than just a thing of the past. The spirit of Chipko has lived on through recent environmental campaigns all over the world. They make sure we never forget how strong grassroots activism can be and that peaceful resistance might be the best way to go when it comes to helping society and our planet.

b) Appiko Movement⁸

The Appiko Movement began in Karnataka, India in year 1983. Panduranga Hegde initiated /the Appiko Movement after he was inspired by Sunderlal Bahuguna's Chipko Movement. It is an important environmental movement aimed at protecting the Western Ghats forests from deforestation and unsustainable exploitation. Similar to Chikpo Movement in North India, "Appiko" means "to hug" in Kannada. The main method used by activists was embracing trees to prevent loggers from felling them. The movement initiated due to excessive logging which was ruining the unique biodiversity of the Western Ghats and affecting local residents' livelihoods.

The Activists of the movement also planted and nurtured new trees for reforestation purposes. They worked collectively as a team so they could revive several areas of forest. They educated locals on forest importance such as how they help maintain soil fertility as well as water resources which are crucial for agriculture.

The Appiko Movement had several important impacts:

- (i) It led to change in policies which causes forest exploitation. It placed restrictions on green tree cutting, and promoted sustainable practices.
- (ii) A cultural revival occurred regarding forests values during this movement. People started practicing traditional knowledge related to forest conservation as well as sustainable use again.

- (iii) This movements influenced more environmental campaigns throughout Western Ghats and other parts of India.
- (iv) It brought up an important topic for discussion such as, finding a balance between development and ecological sustainability.

The Appiko Movement is proof that grassroots activism plays a major role in environmental conservation. By mobilizing local communities and having them develop a strong connection with nature, they were able to not only save the forests of Western Ghats from destruction but also inspire them to fight for their rights to a healthy lifestyle amongst nature.

c) Narmada BachaoAndolan⁹

The Narmada Movement, also known as Narmada BachaoAndolan (NBA), is a massive social movement in India¹⁰. It highlighted environmental sustainability and human rights. NBA was formed to protest against the building of hydroelectric dams on the Narmada River. The river runs through Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. They claim that if these projects continue it would greatly damage not only the environment but people's lives as well.

The activists like Baba Amte and Medha Patkar were among the popular person who were leading the movement. One of their main concerns was how many communities would be displaced if the dam were to go through, as well as the destruction of ecosystems, loss of land, and forest cover.

Thousands of families were forced out without any kind of backup plans or rehabilitation. A lot of them were indigenous tribes who had no other means for survival. The loss of biodiversity after submerging 37000 hectares acres of land in water was too great for environmentalists to settle on. They believed that the destruction would outweigh any good that could come from the construction. The NBA made sure to use every platform they could find to make it known what was happening. Strikes and protests were made and cases taken to court, their movement gained enough attention that even international courts stepped in.

The Narmada BachaoAndolan had several important impacts:

- (i) It increased scrutiny of development projects. When approving large-scale projects in India there is now much harder criteria for them to pass.
- (ii) People realized during these trials how terrible their current system was when dealing with issues like displacement. Since then, policies have been put into place so something similar won't happen again.
- (iii) In India, it led to numerous other grassroots movements have formed demanding change when it comes to human rights.
- (iv) Influence on other movements numerous groups throughout India took inspiration from NBA, showing the world that change is possible even without violence. They introduced non-violent resistance and community mobilization to environmental advocacy.

The Save the Narmada Movement was a pivotal point in time for India, as it brought everything they've been doing in terms of development into question. Their actions showed that there are alternatives to a lot of the damage being done currently. The NBA's legacy is proof that every country is capable of a sustainable future if its citizens decide to take action and demand change from their politicians.

d) Silent Valley Movement¹¹

The Silent Valley Movement was a significant environmental campaign in India during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Poet activist Sugathakumari was a key figure in the Silent Valley protest; her poem "Marathinu Stuthi" (Ode to a Tree) served as the opening prayer and song for the majority of "save the Silent Valley" campaign events and became a symbol for the protest within the intellectual community.¹²

This movement aimed to protect the untouched Silent Valley, a tract of tropical rainforest in Palakkad district, Kerala. It heightened awareness about development vs conservation conflicts, resulting in stronger environmental preservation policies in India.

Silent Valley is a vulnerable ecosystem that's rich with biodiversity. In the late 1970s, the Kerala State Electricity Board proposed building a hydroelectric dam on Kunthipuzha River. The flooding caused by this would destroy 8.3 square kilometers of thriving rainforest and disturb the habitats of many different endemic species. This movement sparked widespread protests from concerned scientists, journalists, poets, local people and environmentalists who all believed it would cause irreversible damage to the area's ecosystem.

Studies showed that many rare and endemic species lived in the valley, some of which are not found anywhere else on Earth. This included an endangered primate called Lion-tailed Macaque. The movement used media platforms to raise awareness about what could become an ecological disaster. With support from well-known figures, it quickly gained momentum and caught the attention of people outside of its immediate vicinity.

After seeing how vehemently activists fought against this project, Government officials decided to evaluate it further before greenlighting anything. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi temporarily put a halt on construction until they figured out whether or not it would be harmful to their environment. A few years later in 1983 once multiple committees reviewed data on ecological impact, central Government made final decision to abandon the project due to its potential harm.

The Silent Valley Movement had several important impacts:

- (i) The Silent Valley Movement was critical in influencing India's environmental policies. It pushed for the formulation of the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980, which made it harder to divert forest land for non-forest purposes.
- (ii) This movement eventually led to Silent Valley being declared a National Park in 1985. This protective status ensures that biodiversity will remain unbothered by humans.
- (iii) The movement raised public and Governmental awareness about the environment on a large scale. It has inspired people across India and beyond to stand up against dangerous projects like this in efforts to stave off potential risks they pose on our environment.

The Silent Valley Movement is one of India's most successful environmental campaigns, proving that scientific advocacy and collective action can save natural ecosystems. It stresses balance between development and ecological sustainability.

e) Save Western Ghats Movement¹³

The Save Western Ghats Movement is a significant environmental and social promotion crusade that looks to save the ecological integrity of the Western Ghats, one of India's most important mountain ranges. This domain, known for its lavish biodiversity and endemism, exists across six Indian states and has been recognized as a UNESCO world heritage site. The movement blossomed in reaction to the mounting threats of deforestation, mining, and large-scale development ventures that could easily tip the delicate equilibrium of nature while annihilating the work and means of local communities.

The movement started gaining momentum in 1980s with increasing environmental consciousness and aided by several local and national environmental organizations. It was influenced by the north Chipko movement and brought together many different segments of society including scientists, activists, indigenous people and common citizens who realize the need for critical protection of the Western Ghats.

The Western Ghats are called one among eight 'hottest hotspots' of biological diversity on the planet. This movement targets against threats on this biodiversity such as illegal logging, mining as well as dam construction. Large-scale agricultural expansions, urbanization and industrialization have drastically changed land use thus causing habitat destruction as well as fragmentation. The Western Ghats play a crucial role in water security of peninsular region through influencing rainfall distribution patterns and acting as source areas for major rivers.

The Save Western Ghats Movement had several important impacts:

- (i) One notable development has been pushing for defining certain areas within the Western Ghats to become Ecologically Sensitive Zones that restrict some types of industrial or developmental activities to protect ecosystems.
- (ii) Through conducting workshops, seminars or direct mobilizing presence, the movement has successfully spread knowledge amongst the public regarding ecological importance of these Ghats thereby leading to community mobilization across various states.
- (iii) The movement resulted in significant policy dialogue that produced several important reports like Madhav Gadgil Committee Report followed by Kasturirangan Committee Report which suggested measures for protection of western ghats.

Save Western Ghats Movement illuminates a complex relationship between ecological conservation and socioeconomic development. It is a beacon of people's movement for the environment, highlighting the role of informed citizenry and scientific research in shaping sustainable development policies. The movement's legacy and ongoing efforts are essential as threats to the Western Ghats continue changing in order to accommodate evolving conservation approaches that will succeed in protecting this ecological treasure for generations to come.

f) Joint Forest Management¹⁴(JFM)

Joint Forest Management (JFM) is a key initiative launched in India during 1990s targeted at ensuring involvement of local communities into management as well as restoration of forest areas. JFM marks departure from earlier forest management practices that were largely centralized as well as exclusionary. This participatory approach was designed to correct past mistakes whereby forest policies often marginalized the local people who depended on forests directly for their livelihoods.

The origin of JFM can be traced back to early experiments on community forestry during 1970's-1980's which were influenced by movements like 'Chipko Movement'. The formal launch of JFM came after release of India Government's resolution on "National Forest Policy, 1988" stating that there was need for participation of local communities in managing as well as protecting forests.

JFM is based on the idea of partnerships between forest departments and local (often tribal) communities who rely on forests for their sustenance. It created local groups, called Forest Protection Committees (FPCs) or Village Forest Committees (VFCs) to ensure that there are groups to preserve and conserve our forest. As a reward for taking care of the forest, communities get some percentage from the money generated by selling timber and other products obtained from this ecosystem as well as benefits from enhanced forest cover and related ecological services.

The Joint Forest Management had several important impacts¹⁵:

- (i) Forest lands in various states across India have been able to regenerate thousands of hectares that were previously degraded. The improved forest cover has enhanced biodiversity and balanced ecologies.
- (ii) The people involved in JFM practices have experienced direct socio-economic benefits as communities. By working together with nature they've also seen improvements in water and soil conservation.
- (iii) Local communities have been empowered through decision-making processes which increases their awareness of responsibility towards forest conservation.

These movements have been pivotal in shaping India's environmental policy and discourse. They underline the complex interplay between environmental conservation, rights of indigenous and local communities, and developmental policies. Through persistent advocacy and grassroots activism, these movements have brought significant policy changes and raised awareness about the need for a more sustainable and equitable approach to environmental governance in India. Their impact extends beyond immediate objectives, influencing environmental jurisprudence, policy formulation, and the global environmental justice movement.

Challenges

The forest dwellers' movements and environmental justice campaigns in India, while significantly impactful, have faced various challenges and controversies. These complexities stem from the conflicting interests of different stakeholders including the Government, local communities, conservationists' & industrial sectors. Here's an overview of some key challenges and controversies:

(i) Conflict with Conservation Goals

Balancing rights of forest dwelling communities with conservation objectives has been a major controversy with critics warning extending rights to locals could lead to over exploitation but proponents argue they have vested interest in maintaining forest sustainability. In national parks or wildlife sanctuaries designated areas there have been tussles between wildlife conservation efforts & indigenous communities' rights where relocation of tribes from these areas is one issue leading to debates over voluntary vs forced relocations & adequacy of rehabilitation measures.

(ii) Development conflict with Environmental Conservation

Mining, dams & industrial expansions in forest areas usually lead to deforestation and displacement of indigenous communities prompting protests and legal battles as Government push for economic development sometimes goes against environmental & social considerations. Controversies have risen on adequacy & transparency of Environment Impact Assessment for such projects as activists accuse them of being superficial without properly considering long-term environmental & social impacts.

(iii) Conflicts with Local Populations

In some cases, forest conservation efforts have restricted access to forest resources for local communities leading to conflicts over livelihoods which has sometimes led to resistance from these communities. Marginalized groups especially tribal communities feel they are inadequately represented in decision-making processes related to forest governance which leads to policies that don't adequately address their needs and concerns.

(iv) Implementation of Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006

Despite being progressive in nature FRA implementation has faced bureaucratic complications with lack of awareness among forest dwellers about their rights taking the front seat among other issues like delays in processing claims & inadequate support in claim preparation. Some state forestry departments have seen reluctance to let go control over forest resources leading to conflicts in implementing the Act which comes from a traditional mindset that believes human intervention especially by locals harm forests.

Socio-political and Environmental Implications

The movements and campaigns for the rights of forest dwellers in India have significant socio-political and environmental implications. These implications extend beyond the immediate context of the forests and their inhabitants, affecting broader aspects of Indian society, governance, and ecology.

a) Socio-political Implications

- These movements have been instrumental in empowering traditionally marginalized groups, especially tribal communities, by bringing their issues to the forefront of national discourse.
- The success of these movements led to shift in governance paradigms. It has forced a reevaluation of the governance models related to natural resources.
- The environmental justice movements have impacted national policies like policies relating to Forest Rights Act.
- Addressing historical injustices as well as advocating for full recognition regarding forest-dwelling neighbourhoods is one large step towards social justice.

b) Environmental Implications

- By advocating for the sustainable management of forests, these movements contribute to biodiversity conservation.

- These movements emphasize the importance of sustainable resource use, advocating for models that balance ecological needs with human requirements.
- Forests play a critical role in climate change mitigation by acting as carbon sinks. The movements stress the importance of forest conservation in combating climate change.
- These movements advocate for a more inclusive conservation ethic that recognizes the role of human communities in maintaining ecological balance.

Conclusion

India's movements and campaigns are at the crucial intersection of many aspects such as, social justice, indigenous rights, and environmental conservation. This has brought about several policy shifts in the country. These changes have also called into question how forests in India should be governed and conserved.

These movements advocate for sustainable development that includes both environmental conservation and community welfare as key factors. These movements have caused significant ripple effects around the world by being vocal about indigenous rights, environmental justice, and sustainable development. The movements in India highlight the crucial need for a balanced approach to environmental governance. It promotes harmonious integration of rights of indigenous communities with conservation objectives.

Empowering indigenous communities and recognizing their traditional knowledge and sustainable practices is not only a matter of justice but also a pragmatic approach to conservation. The success stories of these movements serve as evidence that grassroots activism holds great power when aiming to influence policy or raise awareness. The movements in India serve as a vital reminder of the interconnected nature of social, environmental, and economic issues. They are all connected like gears in a machine, each one equally important as the others if we sincerely wish for sustainable development. The movements offer insights into a better future for both people and the world they inhabit, with lessons on how to create equitable, sustainable, and resilient systems.

The journey of these movements illustrates the dynamic nature of environmental governance, where continuous dialogue, adaptation, and inclusive participation are key to addressing the complex challenges of our time. These movements serve as an inspiration to those who wish to bring about change regarding environmental justice in the future.

Footnotes

1. Shastri, S.C. (2005) *Environmental Law* 259, Eastern Book Company Lucknow 2nd edn.
2. Guha. (1983) 'Forestry in British India and Post British India: A Historical Analysis' EPW 1822, Oct 29, 198
3. Held in 1970 also known as *चिपको आंदोलन*, 'hugging movement.
4. Chandi Prasad Bhatt (born 23 June 1934) is an Indian environmentalist and social activist,
5. Bahuguna, Sunderlal, (9 January 1927 – 21 May 2021) was an Indian environmentalist and Chipko movement leader.
6. Melissa Petruzzello "ChipkoMovement" available at; <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Chipko-movement>, Assess on 23/02/2019
7. Mishra, Amit "Chipko: an unfinished mission" available at <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/chipko-an-unfinished-mission-30883>, Assess on 01/02/2019
8. Launched in September 1983 by women and youth of the region, in South India.

9. Narmada river project encompassing three major states of western India Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra
10. In September 1989, more than 50,000 people gathered in the valley from all over India to pledge to fight “destructive development.”
11. It was started in 1966 by an NGO led by Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP).
12. Sridevi Mohan (April 24, 2004). “Bio-reserve nonpareil”. *The Hindu*. Retrieved May 5, 2014.
13. Kumar Kalanand Mani, Launched Save the Western Ghats Movement in 1987.
14. Joint Forest Management originated in Odisha in 1988 .
15. Ram Prasad “Joint forest management in India and the impact of state control ver non-wood forest products” available at: <https://www.fao.org/3/x2450e/x2450e0c.htm>, Assess on 23/02/2019

---==00==---