

# Environmental Movements in India - A Historical Perspective

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## Abstract

*This research paper explores the beginnings, significant turning points, and effects on policy and public awareness of the historical development of environmental movements in India. In India, environmental movements have arisen in reaction to several issues such as land degradation, climate change, industrial pollution, deforestation, and water scarcity. With protests against exploitative forestry practices and dam construction projects during the colonial era, modern environmental activism emerged. Its roots are in India's rich cultural past, where reverence for nature has been engrained for millennia. Following independence, attention turned to projects fuelled by development, which created tensions between industry and conservation. Notable campaigns against environmental degradation and displacement include the Chipko Movement in the 1970s, in which peasants embraced trees to stop deforestation, and the Narmada Bachao Andolan in the 1980s, which protested against massive dam projects. To fully appreciate the intricacies, motivations, and consequences of environmental movements in India, it is imperative that we first grasp their historical trajectory. This will help us to better shape sustainable development paths for the twenty-first century.*

## Introduction

As a result of urbanisation, climate change, and globalisation, environmental activism has increased in the twenty-first century. Protests against coal in Mahan, the Save Western Ghats Movement, and the battle against air pollution in Delhi became well-known, illustrating a range of issues from different demographic groups and geographic areas.

Not only have these movements sparked legislative changes, but they have also increased public awareness and supported neighbourhood-based conservation efforts. Additionally, they have impacted court decisions, resulting in historic rulings that support sustainable development and protect environmental rights.

Notwithstanding their successes, environmental movements in India continue to encounter numerous obstacles, such as institutional support gaps, vested interest co-optation, and the requirement for inclusive and equitable involvement. Maintaining the momentum of environmental activism in India will require moving forward, creating connections between traditional knowledge systems and contemporary science, improving

environmental governance processes, and encouraging grassroots empowerment. Western countries are the origin of environmental movements in modern science. However, it has dispersed widely during the past 20 years, even into the so-called third world. As a result of the indifferent attitude of the federal, state, and local governments as well as statutory bodies. Due to the environmental issues, local projects launched by those impacted and concerned have filled the void. To provide growth via environmental production a new direction, several environmental groups and organizations have been working on a variety of topics. Many local protests are held in opposition to dams submerging land. Deforestation, mining activities, exploitation of natural resources, and contamination of water channels, rivers, lakes, and farmland against increasing encroachments. A new generation of academics and scientists is contributing significantly to these efforts. These individuals empathize with the issues and goals of the public and look for the scientific data necessary to support their claims. Alternative development concepts and solutions have been proposed by these people's movements. 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.

### **Reasons for the Emergence of Environmental Movements in India**

Major reasons for the emergence of the environmental movements include

- Control over natural resources
- False developmental policies of the government
- Socio-economic reasons
- Environmental degradation
- Spread of environmental awareness and media

### **Environment Movements in India**

India is home to a wide variety of landscapes, abundant biodiversity, and a rich cultural legacy. It has also served as a hub for multiple environmental initiatives. These movements, which have spread from the Indian Ocean coast to the foothills of the Himalayas, have become potent symbols of opposition, concern, and support for sustainable development and environmental preservation. India's major environmental movements, their accomplishments, historical backgrounds, and current difficulties.

### **Historical Context**

India's environmental movement is deeply ingrained in the nation's history and socioeconomic shifts. Protests over land grabs, water management practices, and deforestation during the colonial era set the foundation for later movements. The 1970s Chipko Movement, which emphasized the close relationship between people and forests, was brought to the attention of the world by women from the Himalayan region who embraced trees to stop logging. Similar to this, the Silent Valley Movement in Kerala during the 1980s advocated for the preservation of ecologically delicate places by opposing the building of a hydroelectric plant.

### **Markers and Accomplishments**

Several environmental movements in India have resulted in notable policy modifications and conservation initiatives. Large-scale dam projects on the Narmada River were opposed by the Narmada BachaoAndolan, a grassroots movement that led to the adoption of resettlement and rehabilitation plans for affected communities. One of the world's biodiversity hotspots, the Western Ghats, are being protected. As a result, industrial activity is restricted and ecologically sensitive

zones have been established. Initiatives like the Clean Ganga Movement have also helped in the efforts to restore the Ganges River's health by increasing awareness of river pollution.

### **Modern Challenges**

India's pursuit of sustainability faces obstacles even in the face of environmental movements' victories. The swift expansion of infrastructure, industrialization, and urbanization present hazards to livelihoods and ecosystems. The fight against air pollution in urban areas such as Delhi highlights the criticality of tackling environmental health concerns. In addition, coordinated action at the local, national, and international levels is necessary to address the effects of climate change, which include extreme weather events, water scarcity, and biodiversity loss.

### **The Way Ahead**

Indian environmental movements must develop and adapt to meet these difficulties. Effective campaigning and policy implementation requires cooperation between civil society organizations, government agencies, academics, and grassroots activists. Ensuring fair and inclusive development necessitates the inclusion of marginalized communities in decision-making processes, such as women and indigenous peoples. A cleaner future can be achieved by embracing cutting-edge technologies like sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and eco-friendly urban planning.

Bishnois, a group of nature lovers in the Indian state of Rajasthan, is known as the country's earliest environmentalists. Guru Maharaj Jambaji established the faith in 1485 A.D., with twenty-nine tenets of life centred largely on encouraging good environmental management. The Jodhpur King desired to construct a new palace. He dispatched troops to harvest wood from the forest area next to Khejarli hamlet, where the Bishnoi residents had contributed to the growth of a profusion of Khejri trees. The Bishnois protested in agony as the King's troops started to damage the trees, but the soldiers disregarded them since they were following royal instructions. A woman from the area named Amrita Devi could not stand to see both her religion and the holy trees in the village. She made the decision to give the trees a real hug and urged others to follow suit, saying that "a chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree." To stop the trees from being chopped down, Bishnois from Khejri and the surrounding villages entered the forest and embraced each tree individually. As each villager hugged a tree, refusing to let go, they were beheaded by the soldier. This voluntary martyrdom continued until 363 Bishnoi villagers were killed in the name of the sacred Kejarili forest.

When the King learned about this action, he hurried to the village, expressed regret, and gave the troops the command to stop their logging. Not long after, the Maharaja declared the Bishnois state to be a protected region, prohibiting damage to animals and vegetation. There is still legislation in the area now.

### **Silent Valley Movement**

A hydroelectric dam was planned to be constructed in Kerala's Palakkad district on the Kundapuzha River as part of the Silent Valley Project. It was intended to generate 240 megawatts of electricity, irrigate an extra 10,000 hectares of agricultural land, and employ 2000–3000 people. Despite being conceptualized in 1963, the project's completion was delayed due to a lack of funding. In its 1976 report, a task team tasked with investigating the Quiet Valley Project and its ramifications recommended that the project be abandoned and the local environment be protected. Later on, a multidisciplinary team including an agricultural scientist, an electrical engineer, a biologist, a nuclear physicist, and an economist was assigned by Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, a non-governmental organization focused on scientific education, to assess the viability and the project's impact. Its research states that if the project is carried out, the Western Ghats' lost remains

of tropical evergreen forests will suffer irreversible harm. In response to this negative assessment, a national effort to preserve the silent valley was started. KSSP led the charge in this conflict. M.S. Swaminathan led a committee that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi constituted to examine the project's costs and advantages. On the recommendation of the committee, the project was not given sanction by the Government of India.

### **Chipko Movement**

The word “chipko,” which means “to hug” in Hindi, conjures up romantic visions of impoverished rural women in Northern India’s hills, resolutely embracing trees to keep them from being felled by the very axes of forest contractors. This was the initial movement of people in India in the contemporary era to oppose deforestation in Uttarakhand’s Chamoli area. The impoverished residents of the hamlet launched this campaign to claim their rights and authority over their resources. Large-scale tree cutting took place in the 1960s while a working plan was in place. This made the Alakananda River flood of 1970 more intense, sweeping away six bridges, sixteen-foot bridges, and twenty-five buses. 101 settlements had 604 dwellings and 500 acres of crops were destroyed. Roads were blocked. Despite this, the exploitation of forests for commercial purposes continued. Chipko movement’s first battle took place in April 1973 in a village called Mandal in the Chamoli district of Uttar Pradesh. People, primarily women, prevented the axe men from entering the forest when the forest service auctioned off 680 hectares of forest in March 1974 to fell trees from the Alaknanda River’s catchment basin. They assaulted the woodcutters, with Gauri Devi leading the charge. The guard in the forest was restrained and brought into prison. The cutters had no choice but to flee. The individuals who started to organize and oppose deforestation were inspired by these success tales. The movement extended to the Bhyunder Valley, the Chamchidhar Forest, the Bhadhyar Ghats, and other Himalayan valleys. This demonstrated that even impoverished, ignorant people can fight against exploitation if they band together.

### **Appiko Movement**

A revolutionary movement centred on environmental conservation in India, the Appiko movement was founded in 1983 by the villages of Uttar Kannada’s Balegadde district, which at the time had 81% of its land covered by forests. Establishing this forest district as a “backward area,” the government started the “development” process. Major enterprises sprang up in the region, including a plywood plant, a pulp and paper mill, and a network of hydroelectric dams built to harness the rivers. Due to overuse of the forest resources by these businesses, large tracts of forest and farmland have been drowned by dams. By 1980, the district’s forest cover had decreased to around 25% of its total area. Having been motivated by the Chipko movement to Panduranga Hegde spearheaded a campaign to rescue the woodlands in Kalase Forest, involving men, women, and children from the Salkani community. Additionally, the activists used street dramas, folk dances, slideshows in deep forests, and foot marches to broadcast the campaign throughout the region and gather momentum. The movement has achieved a fair amount of success. The state government has banned the felling of green trees in some forest areas; only dead, dying and dry trees are felled to meet local requirements.

### **Conclusion**

The idea behind environmental movements is that they are large networks of individuals and groups working together to improve the environment. It is recognized that environmental movements are extremely complex and diverse, with organizational structures ranging from the highly their operations’ spatial extent from the local to virtually worldwide, their priorities ranging from a

single problem to the complete spectrum of global environmental concerns, and their organization from officially institutionalized to radically unstructured. An inclusive understanding allows us to examine the connections between the various facets and manifestations of what activists refer to as “the environmental movement” and is compatible with how the word is used by environmental activists themselves. Especially after the 1970s, India saw the emergence of several environmental movements. However, as these movements have expanded their focus from fundamental survival requirements to ecological issues, several of the modern movements have gained the distinction of ecological or environmental movements in hindsight.

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