
UNIT 11 ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS*

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11.1 INTRODUCTION

Mahatma Gandhi's life and work have had a pervasive effect on post-independence India. His words and deeds have inspired not only Indians, but people all over the world. Gandhi was a naturalist and he often propagated respecting nature and the environment which nurtured people. His simple living and high thinking, apart from the precepts he set forth in his ashrams, speaks volumes of his adherence to the principle of living with nature. As Guha points out, 'Gandhi's reservations about the wholesale industrialization of India are usually ascribed to moral grounds—namely the selfishness and competitiveness of modern society, but they also had markedly ecological undertones'.⁶⁵ Raghuramaraju (Ed). *Debating Gandhi: A Reader*. Oxford University Press. New Delhi. 2006.

This is further echoed in the words of Pravin Sheth who remarks that Gandhi warned against three uninterrupted movements that create environmental degradation problems, such as uninterrupted industrialization, urbanization and profit motives of the capitalist system at the cost of developing countries. He further says that 'Gandhi expected a balanced approach all along the line so as to threaten neither man nor nature. Gandhi was ignored when he insisted on such equilibrium between technology, economy and society. But experiences have forced us to turn to him with appreciation'.⁶⁶ Gandhi's preference for a traditional way of life endowed with natural air, water and sunshine and dislike for urban life is well known. By speaking for voluntary reduction of wants and use of minimum resources, Gandhi set a fine example to emulate for many a generation to come. Undoubtedly, we can say that Gandhi's ideas and views influenced the later environmental thinking, practice and also created the momentum for further non-violent environmental movements.

In his lifetime Gandhi himself was not actively involved in any environmental movement, but it was his ideals of Satyagraha, ahimsa and self-sacrifice which formed the planks of environmental movements that followed later on. Gandhi

foretold that unbridled development and human greed would lead to environmental degradation and this would increase human hardship.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand:

- Influence of Gandhi's philosophies and methods on environmental movements.
- Causes for the emergence of environmental movements and their significance.
- Major and popular environmental movements that have taken place over the years.
- Techniques and methods adopted to make the environmental movements a success.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

- 1) How have Gandhi's philosophies, ideologies and methods influenced the environmental movements in the contemporary times?

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11.2 ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS

Environmental movements are generally understood as those movements that are taken up against the development projects as the latter depend on vast amounts of natural resources and their injudicious use and exploitation. This brings in with it the concept of 'resource exploitation' through 'conquest over nature', which is highly mistaken as available in abundance. It overlooks the fact that nature provides only to a certain extent and that resource depletion poses major threat to human survival. Therefore the movements are often organized to protest against the exploitation of the nature thus bringing in the concept of ecological and environmental sustainability.

According to the noted environmentalist, Dr. Vandana Shiva, 'movements are major social and political processes, however, and they transcend individual actors. They are significant precisely because they involve a multiplicity of people and events which contribute to a reinforcement of social change'.⁶⁷ The movements related to environmental and natural resource protection witnessed large participation from the concerned local and other communities. These have been movements of social change that have set classic examples for all times to come.

It is also appropriate to quote her words relating to the ecological movements. "Ecology movements are political movements for a non-violent world order in

which nature is conserved for conserving the options for survival. These movements are small, but they are growing. They are local, but their success lies in non-local impact. They demand only the right to survival yet with that minimal demand is associated the right to live in a peaceful and just world. With the success of these grassroots movements is linked the global issue of survival. Unless the world is restructured ecologically at the level of world-views and life-styles, peace and justice will continue to be violated and ultimately the very survival of humanity will be threatened.”⁶⁸

Unlike the West, India’s concern for environment and nature date back to centuries where the concern for natural resources and elements formed a part of the lifestyle of the people. Environmental movements in India have been more or less conducted at the grassroots levels and more so not by the educated elite but by simple village folk and tribals depending on the region. These have been initially characterized by protests against the big companies indiscriminately using the forest resources for commercial purposes. Later the movements focused on water issues, flora and fauna, biodiversity, and massive deforestation till the recent river pollution, the prime examples being the Ganga and Yamuna clean-up action plans.

One of the earliest known cases of forest conservation dates back to 1730, where around 300 members of the Bishnoi community in the Rajasthan State, led by a woman called Amrita Devi tried to protect the Khejri trees from felling by clinging to them and sacrificed her life in the process. The natural resource exploitation is said to have started prominently during the British rule, when the enormous forest resources were used for commercial purposes and for the railway network link. The local tribes and communities are especially involved in saving the natural resources not only for sustaining their livelihood needs but also for the nation at large. Chipko Movement is one such pioneering movement in the post-independent India and set an example that has been emulated by others.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
 ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What were the causes for the emergence of various environmental movements?

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11.3 CHIPKO MOVEMENT-1973

The Chipko Movement, a non-violent, social and ecological movement originated in the Garhwal Himalayan mountain region of the present Uttarakhand state. The region is known for its fragile ecology, often prone to earthquakes, erosive

rivers and steep valleys that are least conducive to agricultural growth. Its vast forest cover and reserves enables the local communities to pick the fodder, fuel and fibers that contribute to their daily sustenance. With no opportunities for viable income, the men folk search for income outside the region while the women are left in the villages often leaving them as the real custodians of the available resources.

The region was also prone to massive deforestation as the commercial exploitation of forests took place on a gigantic scale in order to meet the needs of ever growing population and urban settlers. It is important to note that the first forest laws were enacted during the British rule. With more demand for wood for commercial and rail link purposes, in Tehri, Garhwal State, between 1840 and 1885, the forests were leased out to contractors for exploitation.⁶⁹ 'The forest laws were enacted to safeguard the vested interests of contractors. Power moved from the hands of the local people into those of government forest officials.'⁷⁰ The encroachment by the influential contractors was highly resented by the local population, an encroachment on the resources over which they had traditional rights.

With massive felling of trees and deforestation in the hills, and with the trees becoming few and far, the village women, who rely mainly on the forest resources for the sustenance, found it difficult to spend enormous time and energy in collecting the necessary fodder and fuel. They would, sometimes go to distance of at least five kilometers to collect the necessary supplies. With the denuding forests, there was also a danger of devastating floods and landslides submerging the houses, crops, and affecting the movement of people and throwing out of gear the irrigation facilities.

In 1973 massive floods destroyed life and property in the region of Alaknanda valley. This was attributed to the denuding of the forests for commercial purposes and felling of trees in the region. Large scale auction and plans for felling of trees in the region was planned by the commercial contractors but had to backtrack their activities because of the active role of the women and the villagers who kept constant vigil on the former's activities. On one such occasion, sensing the absence of men from the village, the commercial contractors sent their labour to axe the trees before the villagers mobilized and started protecting the trees. Later, as the women spotted the labour with axes, who had come to cut the trees, they protested and vowed to protect the trees. Small groups of women kept constant vigilance and hugged the trees in order to prevent the felling. Led by Sundarlal Bahuguna, Gauri Devi and Gunga Devi, along with their co-workers, the movement was a much successful one. Consequently, the government imposed a ban on the commercial green felling in the region.

This incident gave the movement a further momentum to mobilize all the villages in the region to protest against the commercial felling of trees, as it led to the fragile ecology dwindling further. The women trekked far and wide for about 75 days appealing to their counterparts in the region to join the demonstrations and vehemently protest against the commercial exploitation of the forests. The method of hugging the trees to prevent their felling was actually used for the first time by Dhoom Singh Negi in Salet forest near the village of Pipleth in Henwal.⁷¹

The Chipko movement was not confined to Reni but spread to Tehri, Kumaon and other areas of the State like Adwani, Amarsar, Chanchnidhar, Dungari, Paintoli

and Badiyagarh. The most beneficial outcome of the movement was the Government's order imposing a ban on the felling of trees in the region apart from the joint forest management mechanisms that followed later. Chipko thus stands out as the most significant movement in the arena of environmental protection. It further highlights the role of women as the torchbearers of similar movements everywhere.

11.4 NARMADA BACHAO ANDOLAN-1985

Narmada is the largest west-flowing river in the Indian peninsula. It arises on the plateau of Amarkantak in the Shahdol district of Madhya Pradesh. It covers the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat and parts of Rajasthan. On its basin, the villages constitute 81 per cent and comprises mainly of tribal population consisting of Bhils, Gonds, Baigas and others whose primary occupation is agriculture. The Narmada basin is rich in its natural resources.

According to the planners of India, Narmada valley was a backward region that lacked irrigation facilities. The mineral and natural resources were unexploited, hydro-electric power was under-utilised and infrastructural facilities were dismal. The area showed characteristic features of underdevelopment like low electricity consumption, little industrial activity, slow urban growth, below average agricultural yields, lack of modern medical, educational and banking facilities were very much evident.

Though the idea of the project was conceived in 1946, the states through which the river takes its course got entangled in deciding the resource use, the area to be irrigated and sharing of water. The project commenced after the Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal (NWDT) gave its consent for the planning and work on the largest single river valley project in India. The project also promised to provide employment, to check floods, supply water for domestic and industrial use and promote tourism.

In reality, the project not only lacked meticulous planning but also careful implementation as it involved a large-scale exploitation of natural resources on the river basin, threatening to submerge the vast areas of forest and agricultural land. The region being geologically seismic zone, the earthquakes posed severe threat to the region, threatening an acute damage to the dam. Over 150,000 acres of forest land came under the submergence threat and the total area of forest under the threat of flood constituted around 350,000 hectares, amounting to around 11 per cent of the river basin's forests. The submergence also posed immense pressure on the adjoining areas and its land resources due to large scale migration of people. These people felt threatened by the fear of getting submerged.

The NWDT laid down certain directives to take care of the displaced people and the compensation that needs to be paid, in place of the land they had lost. It called for an adequate resettlement grant, and the provision of basic amenities like housing sites, primary schools for children, health dispensaries and transport facilities. The directives did not contain the provision for land acquisition for the displaced and directed the latter to acquire land with the resettlement sum provided by the government. It had also posed new challenges like unemployment and inadequate measures of alternative incomes in the new villages. The rehabilitation efforts varied from state to state with Gujarat providing better compensation and

resettlement facilities as compared to Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. With no hope for a secure economic future, the displaced launched the 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' in order to assert their rights and ensure justice. The Andolan (struggle/movement) is one of the longest struggles against a development project in the post-independent era, asserting the rights of the displaced and demanding an adequate compensation package for such communities.

The 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' or 'Save the Narmada Movement' is essentially a movement against the pattern of development as mentioned above. It is a crusade to ensure justice of the affected people due to dam construction. The main thrust of the Andolan is to oppose the Sardar Sarovar Project, the largest dam to be built on the Narmada. The struggle started in 1985, relied on hunger strikes, solidarity marches and mass media publicity to spread awareness of the issue, making it one of the pioneering non-violent struggles undertaken to ensure justice to the people. In 1989, it became a full-fledged environmental and livelihood movement, vehemently opposing the dam construction and demanding a just resettlement policy. Medha Patkar, an inspiring leader of the movement, undertook several fasts and hunger strikes that eventually led to an independent review of the project by the World Bank, one of the sponsors of the project and eventually to its withdrawal in 1995. The activists of the movement faced stern police action and lathi charges throughout the course of the struggle. The activists who took part in the struggle hailed from Badwani, Omkareshwar, Alirajpur, Jhabua etc.

The matter was finally taken up in the Supreme Court where NBA filed a writ petition. The court did not stop the construction of the dam but allowed it to continue with specific conditions. Though the verdict was not in favour of the NBA after a lengthy legal tussle, the NBA continued its incessant non-violent struggle; following an unwarranted police action against the activists, the Jabalpur High Court recognised the displaced people's right to protest, hunger strike and peacefully conduct their struggle. It passed orders to the state government to adequately compensate those Satyagrahis who were subjected to illegal arrest and police action. The issue of rehabilitation was discussed again recognising their right to life and livelihood. Many of the activists courted arrests, waged non-violent struggles and demanded land-based rehabilitation for the landless apart from the demand to take action against the corrupt officials involved in disbursing the funds to the re-settlers. There were also massive struggles as the Indira Sagar and Omkareshwar affected people continued their indefinite hunger strike for many days and were joined by others who started three-day relay fast in solidarity. It was evidently clear that the people have asserted their resolve to carry on the struggle, with peaceful agitations to achieve their full rights and just demands.

But the subsequent hearing of the court and its verdict severely reprimanded the officials concerned to carry out the rehabilitation of the displaced without which the dam construction may be halted. While allowing the continuation of the dam construction, the court passed strict orders for the rehabilitation work that required an immediate attention simultaneously. NBA has been effective in its multiple strategies at the executive, legislative and judicial level, campaigning against the destruction and displacement caused by large dams and for the

11.5 SILENT VALLEY MOVEMENT-1986

The Silent Valley National Park is one of the last undisturbed rain forests and tropical moist evergreen forests in India. The park is located in the Nilgiri Hills, Palakkad District in Kerala, South India. The British named the area 'Silent Valley' because of a perceived absence of noisy Cicadas. At first, the Silent Valley got world attention not because of its rich natural diversity, but the successive struggle of the native people against the proposed hydroelectric project in the valley by the Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB). In 1928 the location on the Kunthipuzha River at Sairandhri was identified as an ideal site for electricity generation.

The Silent Valley Movement got national attention during the 1980s when the state-led development projects were dominating the scene. The dams were viewed as the 'icons' of development. Plans for a hydroelectric project that threatened the park's high diversity of wildlife stimulated an Environmentalist Social Movement in the 1970s called 'Save Silent Valley'. In 1976 the Kerala State Electricity Board announced a plan to begin dam construction and the issue was brought to the notice of the public.

The movement, in unequivocal terms, underlined the importance of protecting the environment for the generations to come. Protecting the lion tailed Macaque became the symbol of non-violent struggle to save the evergreen forests from total destruction. Many environmental groups like the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and Silent Valley Action Forum participated in the campaign. The prominent leaders were Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, Sundarlal Bahuguna, Baba Amte and Sunita Narain. The campaigns launched through the media, both print and electronic, generated public opinion in favour of the protection of the ecosystem of the silent valley.

The movement was first initiated by the local people and was subsequently taken over by the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP). Various scientific studies conducted by KSSP unequivocally emphasized the need for the protection of ecosystem in its pristine form for serving the interests of mankind. It was the biologist leaders of KSSP who identified the importance of protecting the valley because of its rich biodiversity.

The KSSP generated public opinion against the project. It had science groups all over the state and through newsletters and journals it had spread the message among the students and youth as also the general public. It had sent a memorandum to the Kerala government about the issues and problems involved. It had organized street plays, exhibitions, public debates, and also conducted a 'marathon march' which covered around 400 villages. The student community also rose against the proposed project and it was the first time in the history of the state where the students agitated for the protection of the environment.

As a result of the massive campaign launched by KSSP, the Central Government appointed Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, a leading plant geneticist and agricultural Scientist to enquire about the issue. In 1983, the Central Government instructed the State government to abandon the Project and on November 15, the Silent Valley forests were declared as a National Park. On September 1, 1986 Silent Valley National Park was designated as the core area of the Nilgiri Biosphere

Reserve. Since then a long-term conservation effort has been undertaken to preserve the Silent Valley ecosystem.

The Silent valley movement was in several ways crucial to other environmental movements in India. The seminal contribution of the Silent Valley movement is that it educated people regarding the importance of environmental protection. It is further realized that effective environmental protection can be achieved only through the active participation of local people in collaboration with the Science Community with the committed involvement of the civil society.

11.6 WATER CONSERVATION MOVEMENT-2000

The water conservation movement is an attempt for protecting our traditional methods of water conservation. The traditional knowledge systems were overshadowed by the big developmental projects of the state. The movements also bring forth an alternative to the existing dominant models of development. The over-exploitation of the ground water for industrial purposes causes drastic decrease in the availability of water. With globalization in progress, big water market lobbies and their attempts to commodify water have changed the symbiotic relationship between the 'nature and man'. Indeed, the poor sections in the society are the victims of this neo-colonial exploitation.

The changed role of the state from that of a provider to facilitator has very much reflected in the water policy of the state. The state has become the supporter of the MNCs. In this changed scenario, the interests of the people has been neglected and ultimately resulted in various struggles for the protection of the basic natural rights of the individuals and communities. There are movements in the civil domain for the conservation of water. There are two versions of activism namely, a well-defined cooperation between the state and the civil society for water conservation and initiative of the civil society to protect resources without any help from the state. For example, the Madhya Pradesh government has made numerous attempts to create a cooperative relation between the state and the civil society to tackle the water crisis. In the Jal Abhishek Campaign (A People's Movement For Water Conservation), the community became the active participant of water conservation.

The movements which are not seeking support from the state are also making constructive attempts to resolve the water crisis. This is so because the people involved in the movements are not convinced about the role of the state in the society because in the present neo-liberal stage of capitalism, the state has been facilitating global finance capital and has acted as an agent of the MNCs, protecting their interests. Rajendra Singh's 'Rashtriya Jal Chetana Yatra' (National Water Awareness Campaign) can be posited in this context. However, there are attempts to preserve the ground water without any support from the government, and based purely on voluntary activism. For example, Osmanabad, a district in Southern Maharashtra had faced severe drought in three consecutive years. The groundwater has almost depleted and the irrigation projects have failed to cope up with the grim situation. The authorities decided to solve the problem with the people's involvement, without any assistance from the state. In March 2004, the Osmanabad district administration, along with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), launched the "Pani Yatra", in order to create awareness among the local population about the importance of protecting the ground water. The 'yatra' passed

through 40 villages in the district and conveyed the message of the importance of preserving the ground water. The ‘Pani Yatra’ was supported by around 40 NGOs.

The ‘Rashtriya Chetana Yatra’ was an attempt to share the water-related concerns between different communities. It was also a campaign against the attempts to privatize water and commercialize it for the world market. A drive to privatize and commodify water is not only unethical but also destroys community rights and erodes community responsibility in water conservation and sustainable use. The ‘Rashtriya Jal Chetna Yatra’ was committed to rejuvenating the culture and practices of water conservation of the local people. It brings to the fore millions of local traditions (johads) and initiatives like rainwater harvesting to revive rivers, recharge aquifers and rejuvenate nature.

The two movements that we have discussed here share many commonalities. Both have emphasized the importance of ground water sources, for the sustainability of humanity and life forms on the planet earth positing the ‘development’ in a people-friendly and nature-friendly perspective. The movements were anti-imperialist campaigns and strongly supported the democratic means to change the society in a Gandhian way.

Check Your Progress Exercise 4

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Write about two major types of water conservation movements.

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11.7 GREENPEACE MOVEMENT-1971

Greenpeace was an international environmental organization founded in 1969, during a non-violent direct action campaign against US nuclear weapons testing in Alaska. Greenpeace probably has been the most successful of the many environmental organizations that use non-violent action. Certainly it was one of the first, and by combining a philosophical base, clear strategic design, scientific research, political and legal research and lobbying, courageous direct action, and brilliant use of media attention, it has made tremendous gains both for the organization itself and for the environment it has sought to protect. The central philosophy of that original ‘Greenpeace’ organization was non-violent direct action on behalf of the planet earth. It was an inspiring concept, and it created a movement.

Greenpeace remains one of the premier environmental organizations, combining the traditional, political activities and coalitions with nonviolent direct action. It is largely because of its innovative uses of nonviolent action, it has had a large influence on both the agenda of the global environmental movement and various

national and international policies. Its activists spearhead six major campaigns to (1) stop global warming, (2) save ancient forests, (3) eliminate toxic chemical production and pollution, (4) halt the genetic engineering of food, (5) achieve a nuclear-free future, and (6) protect the world's oceans.

11.8 SUMMARY

We live in a world in which science, technology and development are increasingly playing an important role in changing human destiny. However, over-exploitation of natural resources for the purpose of development has led to severe environmental hazards. In fact, the idea of development is itself controversial in the present situation as in the name of development, we are unethically exploiting natural resources. It is true that a science that does not respect nature's needs and a development which does not respect people's needs threatens human survival. The green thoughts of Gandhi give us a new vision to harmonize nature with the needs of people.

Gandhi was not an environmentalist in the modern sense. Although he did not create a green philosophy or write nature poems, he is often described as an 'apostle of applied human ecology'. It is a fact that environmental concerns were minimal in Gandhi's time; but eminent environmental writers like Ramachandra Guha consider him an early environmentalist. His views on nature can be abundantly found in his various writings. His ideas relating to Satyagraha based on truth and non-violence, simple life style, and development reveal how sustainable development is possible without doing any harm to nature and our fellow beings. His idea that 'nature has enough to satisfy every one's needs, but not to satisfy anybody's greed' became an inspiration to modern environmentalism.

Post-independence fast paced development in India led to ecological problems. Need to exploit water resources, forests and land began to harm people dependent on these resources and their very existence. The environmental movements in India began to fight against destabilization of people and loss of natural resources, but it is very clear that they have been deeply influenced by Gandhi's concept of Satyagraha and ahimsa. The 1970s saw the environmental issues coming to the international fora with the Stockholm Conference being one of the pioneering conventions on this issue. India committed itself to the protection of the natural environment according to the International norms and rules.

11.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Your answer should include Gandhi's understanding of possessive self, materialism and modernity as industrialization as key to environmental decay.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Explaining the development model leading to resource exploitation should be the key to answer this question.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

- 1) Briefly explain the contribution of various environmental movements in India.