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**Media Coverage Of Environmental Problems And Policies
In India : History And Overview**

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Media Coverage of Environmental Problems and Policies in India

History and Overview

Some people date the beginnings of the environmental movement in India to Chandi Prasad Bhatt's Chipko Andolan (Hug the tree campaign) in 1973; others, particularly government officials, trace it to the interest shown in the subject by Mrs Gandhi after the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the human environment.

Whether initiated by the Himalayan villagers -- who hugged trees in order to plainly tell forest contractors not to fell them and to focus world attention on the environmental problems of the Alaknanda catchment area of the mid-Himalayas -- or by an urban prime minister, the movement itself has acquired an extraordinary spread and vitality in recent years, as has the momentum of publicity in the mass media.

Clearly, judging from the spate of stories on environmental issues now appearing in the Indian press, "environment is a subject whose time has come," to quote Darryl D'Monte, resident editor of The Times of India, Bombay, and a leading green in the country. As he observed, "Hardly a day passes without some

mention of a development concerning the environment: whether it is dams, pollution, tribal issues or slum-dwellers' problems."

This is perhaps because most editors consider environment a safe subject -- a non-political issue that will not necessarily bring them on collision course with the powers-that-be. However, as Mr D'Monte points out, "the environment is entirely political -- simply because almost every issue concerns certain socio-economic interests and their manipulation. Because the environment is the ultimate source of all resources which make life possible -- food, energy, materials -- and the control of these resources is a purely political issue, even if it does not appear so to editors."

The state-owned electronic media -- Doordarshan (TV) and All India Radio -- however, prefers to largely ignore controversial environmental issues. It does however promote 3-minute spots and ad campaigns against pollution or the odd programme on wildlife and the general state of the environment. Doordarshan does on occasion hold discussions on crucial issues like dams, development or forest policies, but the debates are rather dreary, and usually telecast at a time when Somnus beckons. Viewership, needless to say, is low.

The information and broadcasting ministry's Films Division, which makes an average of 150 newsreels and documentaries a year (and spent Rs 13.12 crores last year), made only 13 films on environmental and developmental issues in the last five years. However, seven of these were made in 1991 -- "a significant

improvement on FD's earlier environmental record," as an FD producer obcorvoc. While four of the 20-minute colour films dealt with developmental projects like the Vishakhapatnam Steel Plant, Coal India, the metro in Calcutta and road-building in Nagaland, the other three dealt with the general environment: two films were on the ills of deforestation. The third titled Namami Narmade was on the Narmada dam. The film, according to the FD bosses, shows both sides of the 'dam' issue. But the interviews with the custeas and activists were brief, while the government officials and planners hogged the limelight.

And as Dr T.R. Saranathan, editor of the Bombay-based Encology magazine, Mr Dittu Sehgal, editor of Sanctuary magazine and Mr Inghal Masud, a noted columnist and TV critic, point out wryly, "environmental programmes with bite are missing on Indian TV." For example, though several international channels have aired programmes on the Narmada dams, not a single film presenting the views of the anti-dam lobby has been shown on Doordarshan. And on the rare occasion that it showed a programme on the issue, it has been known to backtrack! A Doordarshan staffer was recently chargesheeted by her employers half an hour after a programme on the pros and cons of large dams was telecast. The reporter had been gutsy enough to land up in the Narmada valley to talk to custeas and officials.

Moreover, while films on the general degradation of the environment have been okayed by Mandi House (Doordarshan headquarters in Delhi), forceful films such as 'Voices from

Baliapal'-- made by a young and ecologically conscious film-maker Ranjan Palit on the controversial nuclear plant in Orissa which won an award at a foreign film festival, has yet to be telecast. This is in contravention of Doordarshan's rules that all award winning films must perforce be shown on the national network. Another award-winning activist, Anand Patwardhan, whose hard-hitting film, 'Hamara Shaher', highlighting the plight of Bombay's slum dwellers and the dubious role of the government in slum demolitions, had to go to court before the media mandarins allowed it to be shown on the national network.

The situation, however, is likely to improve this year. For, the Supreme Court has recently directed both Doordarshan and AIR to air regular environment news and programmes from February 1, 1992. The court has ruled that at least 5-7 minutes of programmes conveying the message of environment should be aired daily. Another happy trend is that Films Division has also hiked its budget for films on environment.

Whatever be the record of the electronic media in India as regards environment, environmental consciousness in the print media has had definite positive spin-offs: the setting up of government departments and inquiries, anti-pollution cells, increased scientific and social scientific research interest, and the growth of citizens' groups concerned with protecting or restoring the environment.

And this is as it should be because India's eco-system is suffering unprecedented onslaughts. Despite afforestation and

other measures, the already scant forest cover is shrinking at the rate of 47,500 hectares a year due to biotic pressures, although this is down from 1.5 million hectares about seven years ago.

Forests in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Orissa are vanishing to meet the insatiable fuelwood needs of the ever-expanding metropolises and towns. The Himalayas are said to be gradually sliding into the Bay of Bengal with an increasingly polluted Ganga carrying down 1.5 billion tonnes of soil annually. The Western Ghats are beset with problems similar to those which have brought the sub-Himalayan region to the verge of collapse. Irresponsible mining and quarrying methods have ravaged large tracts of once fertile lands particularly in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. And large dams are threatening to submerge as much land as they promise to irrigate.

A few controversies widely reported in the press in the last few years (apart from the vexed Narmada Valley project) are the Kaiga nuclear project in Karnataka, the Baliapal nuclear missile project in Orissa, the Silent Valley project in Kerala, and the Tehri dam in the Garhwal Himalayas of Uttar Pradesh. A devastating earthquake last October, measuring 6.1 on the Richter scale, that shook the Uttarkashi region where the Rs 3,465 lakh Tehri dam is to be located, triggered off a fiery debate in the media. Once again, the rationale of siting such a massive reservoir in so brittle a topography was widely questioned.

One can get an idea of the length and breadth of current environmental news and views in India from the 200-page Green

File -- a compendium of news items from about 25-30 major

English and Hindi newspapers and a dozen newsmagazines in the
country -- brought out by the Centre for Science and Environment
(CSE) in New Delhi every month.

The CSE is a voluntary organisation devoting itself to the
propagation of information on environmental/developmental issues.
The list of newspapers from which the CSE culls news items is by
no means complete. Not only are many smaller papers excluded but
so are smaller editions of mass-circulation dailies, not to
mention those in other Indian languages. Still, it does provide a
crude estimate of environmental coverage in the mass media.

A quick scan of the Green File -- which lists the subjects under

16 different heads including dams, forests, pollution, health,
industrial accidents and Bhopal, energy, mining and environment
and water and fisheries -- of August, September and October 1991,
shows that the newspapers had devoted about 4,070 column cms to
dams, 3,300 col cms to pollution, 2,600 col cms to energy and
2,400 col cms to forests and 1,900 col cms to water and
fisheries in just those three months.

While the articles on dams and forests were general in nature, a
large number of those on pollution were more localised. The
Indian Express highlighted civic and sanitary problems in the

cities, as did the Times of India on their city pages. Most of
the magazines, in particular the respected Economic and Political

Weekly, highlighted local environmental movements and had experts
offering critiques of governmental policies on development.

The data clearly reveals that large dams are a pet obsession with the Indian press. Over half the articles under dams dealt with the World Bank-funded Narmada project; the rest with the equally controversial 261 metre-high rockfill Tehri dam, and Subarnarekha projects. (The Rs 2,500 crore Subarnarekha project is a joint venture of the state governments of Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal. It consists of the construction of two dams across the Chandil and Kharkai river, two barrages and canals that would have an irrigation potential of 280,000 hectares and also provide 400,000 litres of water for domestic use to half a dozen towns in the region.)

The articles in the national English and Hindi press on large dams were near-unanimous in their arguments: review the projects, think about the ecological wreckage, improve the rehabilitation facilities; think more deeply about the displaced. Interestingly, while the national newspapers, particularly the Times of India and the Hindu were dead set against the Narmada project, the Gujarati press was all for it. (But more on this in the following section on Narmada.)

Discussion of media treatment of the Narmada project:

Manibeli was once an obscure Indian village, hidden from the eyes of the world. Today, it is on the world environment map -- the focal point, as it were, of the Third World's largest environmental movement -- thanks primarily to the Indian press.

Situated on the Gujarat-Maharashtra border, the village is the

scene of a sustained agitation that regularly has both metropolitan and metropolitan journalists descending upon it by the dozen -- as much to capture the drama, one must admit, as to highlight the issue at stake. For, the agitation has on occasion turned at once dead serious and sensational with threatened residents and outraged activists of the Narmada Bachao Andolan -- like Baba Amte and Medha Patkar who were awarded the 1991 Right to Livelihood Award, the 'alternative' Nobel Prize -- forming 'jal samadhi' (voluntary death by drowning) squads to stop construction of the World Bank-funded Rs 11,000 crore Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada river.

The reason for the protest is well known: the mammoth reservoir threatens to submerge the village, along with 1.3 lakh hectares of prime agricultural and forest land. Moreover, it would displace over three lakh people of the Narmada valley and seriously disturb the ecological balance of the area as 28 million trees would have to be cut at one go.

The locals, incidentally, are less concerned about issues like large dams, global warming or the ozone layer. They are merely fighting to save their land and hearth. For them, the environmental movement is by the way. It is the activists and journalists who have brought the dangers of the dam into the hot spot of public attention.

After the Bhopal gas tragedy in December 1984, Narmada has become the most widely reported controversy in India. Several leading national English dailies -- such as the Indian Express, The Times

of India, The Hindu, Statesman and The Hindustan Times -- have covered every twist in the movement; are generally balanced in their reporting, though editorials have been uniformly critical of the project, and have succeeded in building a body of negative opinion on large dams in the country.

Their views were even actively supported by former minister of state for environment, Ms Maneka Gandhi, who went on record to say that there must surely be something wrong with a project which will submerge almost as much area as it is meant to irrigate. The present dispensation is, alas, not quite as receptive.

Interestingly, however, the Gujarati press is all for the Narmada project. The pro-dam stance of the Gujarati press clearly reveals the state-capitalist nexus. The local media barons are reportedly close to the state's chief minister Chimanbhai Patel, who has glorified the Sardar Sarovar project as being the 'lifeline of Gujarat'. The interests of Gujarat's elite were projected as being consonant with the 'public interest' of Gujarat and the 'common Gujarati'. Newspapers like Gujarat Samachar and Sandesh harped on the 'violent' intentions of the NDA's yatra and alleged that the NBA consisted of wood-poachers and drug-runners, whose livelihood was threatened by the dam. So much so that much of rural and lower middle class Gujarat swears by the dam. But the middle class is yet to be convinced.

Problems of covering environmental issues in India:

It must be pointed out that despite the quantum jump in

environmental reporting in the media, things are far from hunky-dory. As in every other line, there are vested interests operating in the press, and biases -- particularly on eco-political issues or on conflict situations -- often creep in.

One notices that while there is a fair deal of consensus on issues like large dams in most newspapers, editorial stances tend to differ substantially on large industrial or land development projects, or on issues where the press has to take the government head on.

The problems faced by reporters covering environmental problems is a lack of a scientific data-base, misinformation by the errant industries and indifference on the part of the policing agencies. Newspaper exposes are not necessarily followed up by the authorities. It is only the local environmental action groups which habitually take the matter to court.

For, despite leading the developing world in enacting environmental legislation, India's record in preserving its natural resources and eco-systems leaves a lot to be desired. The government had drawn up a draft National conservation policy in 1990, but the policy is yet to be formalised. The draft plan was circulated among a few environmental groups and non-governmental organisations for their suggestions, but unfortunately was not followed through by the environment ministry.

The 'Environment Protection' Act, 1986, which was passed in the aftermath of the Bhopal gas leak, is largely ineffective. The act

had envisaged the setting up of an Environment Protection Authority, but to this day, it has neither been set up nor have finances been allocated for the implementation of the act.

Moreover, though the union government has set up two central pollution control boards and 23 in the various states, these agencies -- which have the onerous duty of pursuing defaulting industries and prosecuting them under the Environment Protection Act or the Air and Water Pollution Control Act -- are hamstrung by a lack of manpower, legal service, funds and state-of-the-art equipment for monitoring pollution levels.

As a consequence, their record in the discharge of duties has been dismal. Their success rate is proof enough of that: of all the cases filed by the pollution control boards in India so far, less than 50 have been settled. Worse, only in a handful of these cases has there been an 'environment-friendly' decision. According to one estimate, the success rate has been only 0.2 per cent.

In these circumstances, industries continue to get away from flagrantly violating anti-pollution norms. Of the 4,000 water-polluting large industrial units, only half have installed pollution control equipment. These don't function all the time though. And more than a million small units have not even begun to think in terms of controlling pollution.

For example in Bombay, there is an uncontrolled release of untreated industrial effluents into the Palalyanga river by chemical, pesticide and dye industries situated on the banks of

the river. These poisons have taken a heavy toll of marine life in the Patalganga eco-system, according to studies conducted by the Bombay-based Institute of Science and the National Institute of Oceanography. Bombay's creeks and coastal waters are now so polluted that the fish catch has dived by almost 80 per cent in the last decade.

Evidently, the presence of the Maharashtra Pollution Control Board has not helped any. Most of the polluting industries get away by either paying small fines or by bribing officials. Another case, which I have followed for the past five years, is the 500-megawatt Bombay Suburban Electricity Supply Company (BSES) thermal station coming up at Dahanu — an orchard and fisheries area — about a 100 miles north of Bombay. Though the union environment ministry's coastal regulations forbid any construction within 500 metres of the high tide line, the BSES is silently carrying on construction work within the MFL limits. This is because the BSES has the tacit support of the Maharashtra government, which is more interested in generating energy for industrial and urban development than in protecting the ecological balance. The government, to no one's surprise, has chosen to take no action against the BSES. And as always it is the active local environmentalists, i.e. the Bombay Environmental Action Group and the Dahanu Taluka Environmental Protection Group that have taken the company to court.

However, here it must be pointed out that a fact grossly underplayed in the mass media is that only 20 per cent of the

pollution in India is caused by industries; organic pollution due to haphazard urbanisation accounts for the remaining 80 per cent.

It must be said that the Indian media's herculean efforts to get the planners to review or change certain projects has not always worked. For instance, despite civil disobedience movements by activists and the affected people and forceful editorials against the Narmada and Tehri dams, work continues undisturbed on these projects.

But the sustained campaign against large dams and the plight of the oustees by the media, local tribal leaders and activists has worked in the case of the Subarnarekha project: the World Bank has actually stopped work on the dams last September because it was dissatisfied with the rehabilitation facilities drawn up by the project planners for the 70,000 people who will be displaced. World Bank officials who visited the site and spoke to the threatened oustees have said that work will restart only after the concerned governments draw up a proper blueprint for rehabilitation. Moreover, a couple of other projects such as Koel Karo dam in Bihar and the Kaiga nuclear plant in Karnataka have run into rough weather, thanks to the media.

The press has, moreover, achieved success on two counts. First, it has mobilised public opinion on major environmental issues, particularly dams and pollution. People who were hitherto unaware of the pros and cons of large dams are now aware of what they are all about. Second, the wide reportage has pushed the World Bank into setting up a review committee on the Narmada project. The

sustained debate on environmental issues has galvanised the Environment ministry into increasing its budget for 1992 by nearly Rs 100 crores -- from Rs 246 crores in '91 to Rs 340 crores in '92.

Here, I would like to point out that despite all its constraints, the press in India is completely free to criticise state-sponsored policies, plans and projects: it can, and regularly does, slam any government project that it believes goes against the interests of the environment.

Environmental journalism has miles to go in India given the country's developmental dilemmas, but heartening trend is that the voice of environmental activists is now being heard throughout the country, and environmental literacy is growing all the time.