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Media And Environmental Protection:
An Indian Perspective

By

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Asia - Pacific Seminar
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Working Session: Role of Mass Media in Environmental Awareness

Media and Environmental Protection - An Indian Perspective

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Media and Environmental Protection

- An Indian Perspective

The media coverage of environmental issues in India, during the recent years, has made impressive strides - both qualitatively and quantitatively. The media, particularly the print media, has concerned itself deeply with the critical state of nation's environment, dangers involved in environmental degradation, articulating the struggles, fears and anxieties of the affected people as also spearheading a general debate on issues of public policy regarding Development and Environment.

The catalytic and stimulating role of media in creating awareness, in chronicling the activities of action groups, grass root movements and voluntary agencies; in informing the readers of the trends and perspectives at the global level and above all, in performing the watch dog function, has been widely recognised. This does not, in any way, mean that environmental reporting in India does not face the constraints that are manifest in such an assignment by virtue of its special nature and requirement.

One of the first issues projected in the media way back in early seventies was threat to the world famous historical monument - the Taj Mahal - as a result of location of a petroleum refinery at Mathura - at a distance of barely 40 Kms from Agra. Immediately after the foundation stone of the refinery was laid by the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi in October 1973, muted protests by several public spirited persons were beginning to be heard. Protest letters were written to the newspapers, questions were raised in the
Indian Parliament and public opinion was sought to be created about the safety of the Taj and other historical monuments at Agra. Several societies, learned bodies and institutions including the prestigious Indian Heritage Society, the Bombay Natural History Society and the Archaeological Society of India, were involved in the mounting campaign launched to save the precious world famous monument and the nearby Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary. The awareness created due to sustained efforts through the press and spate of articles and editorials that appeared in leading newspapers made the government sit up and appoint an expert committee to examine the dangers to the Taj. These sustained efforts, through the press, resulted in the government agreeing to closing down the two thermal power stations located at Agra and shifting the existing small scale industries and foundries to an area beyond the Taj, apart from provision for establishing a green belt between Agra and Mathura. An other welcome decision with long term implications was to create facilities and expertise for building up environmental research within the country.

Taking cognizance of the deep concern, as a result of sustained media campaign and opinion building at several seminars, exhibitions and environmentalist's meets, the Government of India approached UNESCO to include the Taj on the world Heritage list, enabling it to receive world wide support in pollution control measures.

The media played a notable part in carrying forward the message inherent in the Chipko Movement, which basically is the movement for protecting environment. Today Chipko has become an important word in the lexicon of environmentalists the world over. The Chipko Movement, literally meaning, hug the trees - received sustained media attention in the country is probably the world's most well known grass roots eco-development movement. One of its pioneers, Mr Sunderlal
Bahuguna, was honoured with the "Right Livelihood Award" for 1987 by the Swedish Parliament at Stockholm in December 1987.

Chipko activists have attracted the attention of environmentalists, Gandhians, various people interested in the process of social change and the media personnel throughout the world.

The non-violent, action-oriented Chipko movement has greatly helped to unite the people and focus attention on the mismanagement of forest resources. Its Gandhian character has brought it considerable sympathy. One line of thought is that the main objective of forest management should be soil and water conservation; forests do not bear timber, resin and foreign exchange but soil, water and pure air. The self-sufficiency of the hill people in food, clothing and shelter is important but is secondary to the major ecological objectives. This cannot be achieved unless all commercial green felling is stopped and no new contracts entered into with industrialists to supply raw material. Another philosophy behind the Chipko movement is the belief that no conservation is possible without the cooperation of the people. Ecodevelopment strategies will inspire the poor when they are based not just on ecology but also on the needs of the people.

Several years ago, the Press Institute of India, joined hands with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in launching a project of commissioning and circulating articles amongst newspapers and magazines on environmental problems. One of the important aspects of this project has been translating such articles not only in the Indian languages but also in Nepali for newspapers in Nepal as also for regional newspapers. Some of the themes selected were: Resistance to pesticides, noise pollution, water-borne diseases and tourism and pollution. The burden of some of these articles was how in the late sixties, underdeveloped countries became willing dumping grounds for multi-national pesticides, when it was discovered in affluent
countries that chemical killers were not an unmixed blessing for mankind. This single topic yielded the largest number of articles for it was realised that a half tested weapon in the hands of unschooled farmers could do more damage than good.

The media has also drawn attention to danger to life from foul environmental conditions, as in the Chembur belt of Bombay; or the degradation of living conditions because of foul water and air, results of industry effluents dumped irresponsibly everywhere.

Several newspapers and magazines have regular columns on subjects like Environment, Ecology, Wild Life, Conservation and Pollution.

The popular English fortnightly news-magazine from New Delhi, India Today, has been conspicuously highlighting the environmental issues in its columns. In one of its issues sometime ago it carried a detailed investigation as to how the popular small hill resorts of Mahablaeshwar and Panchgan near Bombay were losing their basic character and ecological balance because of the construction boom let loose upon the area by builders and promoters of housing schemes. Two other newspapers, The Times of India and the Statesmen have been regularly writing on environmental issues. The Times of India, in its Agenda section, as also on its edit page, has been running articles on a very wide variety of environmental subjects. Some of these are: Alarming rise in pollution, Ulti Survey; a book review on Supreme Court decisions on pollution control, metal poisoning of workers; Environmentalist as Scapegoat. The current debate on Economic Development versus Environmental Protection is adequately reflected in the newspaper through edits, articles, letters to the Editor columns.

An interesting feature of the environmental reporting scenario
in the country in the public interest litigation launched by social activists to protect green belt in towns from encroachment at the hands of municipal corporations and builders. The fact of the matter is that the courts of the country have come to the rescue of environmentalists where the local administration or the government failed to take effective measures to enforce legal provisions. Reporting of such cases has led to more active interest in protecting the environment. Likewise the ineffective working of the Boards for Prevention and Control of Water Pollution, lack of political will to enforce anti pollution laws, loop holes in the anti-pollution legislation have helped create a body of public opinion alert to meet the situation.

During 1988 the Indian press succeeded in highlighting the ill effects of big dams, which resulted in Government's decision to abandon the Sodhchat project on the Indravati river in Madhya Pradesh, pending a fresh reappraisal of its impact on the environment. The media also focussed its attention on various 'environmentaly destructive developmental projects'. The three month old campaign - Save the Western Ghats march - during 1987-88, a unique 3000, km padyatra (Walkathon), covering Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu involved more than 200 non-governmental organisations. The March culminated in a 'Save the Western Ghats' conference at Goa where a network to coordinate various activities for re-greening the degraded hills was proposed to be formed.

The press has also been performing a watch dog function in monitoring the progress of several high-budget ambitious plans launched by the Government of India during the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90) such as the Ganga Action Plan. The river Ganga, symbol of India's culture, the source and inspiration for its legend and poetry, is today one of the most polluted rivers of the country. The press has come out with several incisive reports on the progress made by several projects
estimated to cost more than US $ 4,000 million during the Seventh Plan period. Similarly other projects on reclamation of wastelands and afforestation are being frequently documented for public scrutiny.

The Hindi language and regional press has been highlighting environmental issues more often and with deeper perception, as it has closer grass root contacts with people directly affected by environmental degradation. The Hindi national daily *Jan Satta*, from the Indian Express group, has a weekly column devoted exclusively to development and environment. It has come out with several articles on air pollution in New Delhi and pollution caused by stone crushing industry and thermal plants in areas in immediate vicinity of the capital. Some other issues which the regional press has highlighted are: the polluted lakes, fuel shortage hardship caused as a result of disappearing forests, etc. Earlier the Kerala newspaper *Mathrubhoomi* had supported the campaign to preserve Silent Valley free as a "gene pool" to study. Even outside Kerala, *Mathrubhoomi*’s Delhi correspondent organised support in the national capital. The *Hindu*, which pays special attention to science and technology also committed itself to the cause. The district press reflects the concern that the common people feel at the deterioration in soil condition and fertility of land due to industries springing up in areas close to urban settlements.

**Electronic Media**

The Indian television, during the last two years organised several programmes to educate the viewers about several aspects of environment. The two well known documentaries - David Attenborough’s *Our Living Planet* and *Survival* provided rich information on nature, wild life and eco-system as a whole. One of the serials in Hindi *Rakshak*, sponsored by a leading Indian business house, pointed out graphically and in detail the threat posed to the beautiful Dal lake
in Srinagar, because of construction of hotels and discharge of effluents and pollutants from house boats and dumping of mud and city wastes.

An interesting related development has been to project the environmental angle in panel discussion on Doordarshan on subjects like tourism (12 February 1988) where in several participants pointed out the pollution and environmental degradation caused to Leh, capital of Ladakh in Jammu & Kashmir, through unplanned tourist expansion.

The on-going tele-serial on environmental issues - Virasat: Cut Inheritance, produced by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), to promote awareness of the importance of conserving our inheritance in terms of nature and culture, is a pointer to the number of complex problems that film makers and programme producers on environment have to contend with. Since the programme failed to interest commercial sponsors - who find the audience for environment films much smaller than entertainment serials - it had to turn to Doordarshan to pay for the series. The serial has also drawn $1 lak from the media commentators, and rightly so, for being only in English. These programmes, mostly on ecology, deforestation and conservation in rural areas, should have been dubbed in Hindi and major regional languages, so that they could have been telecast in regional slots from local centres. It is inexplicable as to how do we serve the purpose of promoting environmental awareness if we confine such programmes only to English knowing audience, who are in any case, better informed, due to their educational background and broader exposure to mass media, than the rural folk. The serial has also missed several other important aspects of environmental degradation like pollution of rivers, discharge of chemical and other poisonous wastes, air pollution etc. And even the programmes on deforestation screened so far have failed to point out the responsi-
bility of the state governments in the area of afforestation, where there has been more of lip sympathy than real concrete action. All these pitfalls notwithstanding, if such programmes could interest commercial sponsors for the future and take up environmental issues in broader perspective, it would have yet served a useful purpose.

Environmental reporting scenario, outlined so far, is not without its complexities. As a specialised subject it has yet to break ground. It is still a part of general reporting in most of the newspapers. Environment still does not make news and headlines, unless the story has political ramifications. Environmental news, even now for most of the times, consists of research studies and reports of seminars from international bodies like U.N., World Health Organisation (WHO), Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP). It is as yet, an evolving discipline, if it could be so termed with much too large a canvas to look after. Since environmental issues cover subjects including air pollution, deforestation, desertification, ecosystems, pesticide pollution, toxic chemical and metals, it is naturally difficult to do justice to a particular subject without adequate background material and a certain basic appreciation of the subject. And this is indeed a tall order for a 'generalist reporter.'

The ESCAP in its publication: Reporting on the Environment, has defined Environmental Reporting as:

"To define environmental reporting just by the issues it includes may be too narrow. A much broader definition states that, since the environment involves the active relationship between people and their living and non-living environs, there is very little reporting that is not environmental. Therefore, environmental reporting includes coverage of health, economics, politics, commerce development, physical resources and a wide variety of scientific research. In short, people's interactions
with the living and non-living components of their environment, which after the environment by using, redistributing or disturbing its resources, constitutes a topic for environmental reporting.

Isn't it interesting? In my opinion a successful environmental journalist besides being all this has to be an activist, who must be prepared to go beyond the confines of his "beat". He has to have interaction with several inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs); social-action groups, voluntary bodies and grass root movements rather than the Ministry and Departments of Environments in the Union and the state governments which have hardly anything to dole out. Several Universities have also been doing useful work. We, at the Haryana Agricultural University have been working since June 1985, in our own humble way, in the direction of creating Environmental Awareness by organising Exhibitions, Symposium and bringing out special issues of our farmers journal: Environment and Man (1985), Environmental Protection-some issues (1987), and Environmental Development: Sustainable Development and Public Participation (1988).

This interest and surge in environmental reporting the world over is also because environmental factor has begun to play an increasingly important role in world development. As has been pointed out by the UNEP Executive Director, Dr. Mostafa Kamal Tolba, in the recent publication, Sustainable Development: Constraints and Opportunities, we have made rapid headway among the decision-makers who work in government, the UN agencies and the development assistance agencies. Few, if any, in those cabals would put a contrary case that development which takes no account of the environment is worth pursuing. At the launch of the World Conservation Strategy, the then UK Environment Secretary, Michael Heseltine observed that "in any individual decision the starting point will be to conserve what
matters — those who have a contrary objective must bear the onus of proof.

Dr. Tolba also points out, "Perhaps the most obvious sign of this transformation is a change in the environmental vocabulary; the emphasis is no longer on 'small being beautiful' or on 'limits to growth', instead we talk exclusively in terms such as sustainable development and rational resource management. These are not new catch-words, but, significantly, none have come along to replace them. The overwhelming concern of the responsible environment movement nowadays is to see these concepts put to work."

In creating this transformation several organisations have made significant contribution. The foremost of course is UNEP. The co-ordinating, catalytic and stimulating role of UNEP the world over is too well known to need any recapitulation here. Suffice to say that its publication, information and awareness programmes have always been most helpful in building up proper perspectives. The Environmental Co-ordinating Unit (ECU) of the ESCAP has been catalytic in organising Asian Forum of Environmental Journalists as also the national forums in different countries. Its publication, Reporting on the Environment, is a valuable source of guidance, for all those working in this area. And of course, it was from one of the AMIC bulletins that I came to know about the ECU and the consultation it had organised on 'Environmental awareness and the role of communicators', the outcome of which was the publication of the above handbook, as also about the Environmental Forum in my own country. An other AMIC publication, Traditional Media in Environmental Communication, gives useful insight in the, as yet unexplored, area. Likewise the Centre for Science and Environment has done pioneering work of a very high order through its "State of Environment Reports."
With the body of material built up by different institutions the world over, and precious perspectives gained in creating environmental awareness through media, there is only one possibility of environmental reporting: notching may more creditable places in years to come.
References


