

## **Online Media and Environmental Activism: Study of Indian Environmental Movements**

Nisha Rani

*Assistant Professor, Amity School of Communication, Amity University, Noida*

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**Abstract:** Environmentalist groups have often relied on grassroots movements, traditional media or localised campaigns to spread awareness and information regarding various environmental issues. However, over the past decade internet has reinvented the forms and practices of activism all around the world. It allows people to participate in simultaneous movements and gives the activists an alternate space to present their side of the story. The paper examines whether the use of social media spurs environmental activism and public engagement. It will also focus on the growth of environmental movements in India.

**Keywords** - Environmental Activism, Online Media, Clicktivism, Media Campaigns

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Online media has gone beyond personal use and opened up opportunities for different groups and organisations to provide information, to attract like-minded people and supporters for civic engagement. Earl and Kimport (2011) argue that “the Web can allow more than the simple argumentation of protest: innovative uses of the web can transform protest” (p.19). They also point out two fundamental “affordance” relevant to activism: first is the idea of cost reduction for organising or participating in a protest. Second, it alters the idea of space and time; activists do not need to be physically together to be able to act together. Thus it becomes important to analyse the impact of internet technologies on various methods of activism. It has brought in a new wave of activism which is starting to gain more power over the years.

The resounding success of social media has encouraged environmental activists to use the platform to spread awareness and concerns. Online petitions, Campaigns, videos, hashtags, blogs are gaining popularity and also giving significant results. The Unfriend Coal campaign by Greenpeace targeting Facebook gained over 700,000 likes, after which Facebook declared that it would introduce a policy giving preference to renewable energy. Youtube videos on climate change, global warming, pollution and other issues can have large impacts and cause major repercussions among viewers. The critics of social media campaigning, however, say that it not enough to bring major changes. White (2013) claims that “Digital campaigning isn't going to cause revolutionary change. A tweet isn't going to influence the wavering or uninterested citizen. The bonds of Facebook aren't so strong that a like or shared infographic will cause someone to stop denying climate change.” Scholars have divided opinion on the impact of Social media to bring in real change. They believe that online campaign can transform to offline engagement only when participants are already motivated.

Environmental concerns and debates had begun alongside the industrial revolution. But issues of war and politics dominated the global debates. It was only during the 1970s and 80s the problems of the environment were being highlighted. In India, the negligence to these issues was worse. The government set up the ministry of environment and forests as late as 1985.

At present we have a number of research institutes, Organisations, NGOs for example, Forest Research Institute, Centre for Science and Environment, Greenpeace, The World Wide Fund for Nature, Swachha which raises awareness about pollution or Aaranyak, which focusses on wildlife conservation. Due to these combined efforts, environmental issues are now part of the national and global discourse.

The key objective of this paper includes:

- 1) To trace the need and growth of environmental activism in India.
- 2) To examine whether the use of online media spurs public engagement.

The research methodology used in this paper is mostly analytical and descriptive. Information's are collected from different secondary sources like Journals, books, research articles, and government data. The study is based on the analysis of various reports and studies carried out by governmental and non-governmental organisations, newspaper articles and academic publications.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental issues began to be discussed and debated only towards the end of the 20th century. Since then a significant amount of literature has been penned down raising awareness about issues of pollution, deforestation, animal rights and several others however it has failed to result in major changes, ideas or even actions to save the environment. Several species of animals have become extinct; pollution level is at an all-time high, global warming is leading to severe climate changes all across the globe but these problems do not seem to alarm the decision makers. US President Donald Trump (2012) tweeted that, "The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive".

It is quite evident that environmental issues are not treated in equivalence to political, economic, social or even religious issues. This is because of our market-led economy which only focusses on profit maximisation, competition and money making rather than a sustainable development approach. "Capitalism" has been identified by several scholars as the root cause of environmental degradation.

Gus Speth (2008) who is a former environmental adviser to the White House, in an interview to Liz Else said that, "My conclusion is that we're trying to do environmental policy and activism within a system that is simply too powerful. It's today's capitalism, with its overwhelming commitment to growth at all costs, its devolution of tremendous power into the corporate sector, and its blind faith in a market riddled with externalities. And it is also our own pathetic capitulation to consumerism. Even as the environmental community swims more strongly against the current, the current gets ever stronger and more treacherous, so environmentalism slips under. The only solution is to get out of the water, take a hard look at what is going on a figure what needs to be done to change today's capitalism".

The concept of 'risk society' emerged out of the growing concerns of capitalism and modernity particularly used in the environmental context during the 1980s and 90s. Anthony Giddens (1998) has defined it as "a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk" (p.27-28), while another sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) defines it as "a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself" (p. 21). The risk here refers to external risks like natural disasters or manufactured risks which are created and caused by humans themselves like pollution, deforestation and others.

On the other hand scholars like Ram Chandra Guha point out that blaming capitalism and the system is not the solution. He blames the environment activists for not focussing on the real solution and fighting for ideal situations that are not possible. Guha (2008) "We cannot live without the market; we cannot live with no contact with the outside world. There can never be a perfect solution to any global problem. There can only be less bad and more bad solutions. The problem with the environmentalists is that they want an ideal solution, which is not possible" (Quoted in Gadgil).

Also, the idea of 'global ecology' has been critiqued by several scholars. Vandana Shiva (1997), "The Group of Seven most powerful countries may dictate global affairs, but they remain narrow, local, and parochial in the interests that guide them. The World Bank is not a bank that serves the interests of all the world's communities but one in which decisions are based on voting weighted by the economic and political power of its donors. In this voting, the communities that pay the real price, those are the real donors, such as the tribal of the Narmada Valley, have no say".

Environmental movements had already begun in the 19th century. The initial movements were based on three broad themes; to preserve the natural resources, to safeguard the wilderness and protest against pollution. It was only after the United Nations Conference on 'Human Environment' at Stockholm in 1972, most of the countries started paying attention to their environmental policies. The stage had previously been set by the disasters of the world wars. The use of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons had destructive implications on the environment. In the year 1962 Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" which highlighted the use and impact of chemical fertilisers led to a nation wide ban on DDT for agricultural use. People were becoming aware of all the environmental hazards and understood the need to preserve nature. Several scholars refer to environmentalism as a post-world war phenomenon.

Online campaigns have also proved to be efficient. For example, the 'GetUp!' campaign in Australia is an independent movement to make the country more progressive and increase people's participation in the democracy. The campaigns are based issues of Environmental Justice, Human Rights, Economic Fairness and also related to Democracy. Similarly, Greenpeace's Facebook campaign 'Unfriend Coal' started after Facebook announced the construction of data centre in Oregon in February 2010. The campaign aimed at putting pressure on Facebook to persuade the company to stop using coal to power its data centres. More than 7,00,000 people participated in this online campaign. After this Facebook announced that it will move away from coal and power their operations including data centres with clean and renewable energy.

Despite the potential benefits and successful online environment campaigns, critics warn against the use of social media tools for activism fearing 'clicktivism' or 'slacktivism'. Lee & Hsieh (2013) argued that, "This is low-risk, low-cost activism that gives a sense of moral justification without the need to actually en-

gage". Critics also believe that it undermines meaningful activism and interferes with collective action. According to clicktivist.org, "The premise behind clicktivism is that social media allows for quick and easy ways to support an organisation or cause. It is the use of digital media for facilitating social change and activism".

In India environment has always been very sacred. Trees and animals are worshipped in several religions. The environmental movements in India have always been localised, carried out at the grassroots level by the local people. This could be debated in the internet and digital era, but as Guha (2013) rightly says, "In the West, the environmental movement had arisen chiefly out of a desire to protect endangered animal species and natural habitats. In India, however, it arose out of the imperative of human survival. This was an environmentalism of the poor, which married the concern of social justice on the one hand with sustainability on the other. It argued that present patterns of resource use disadvantaged local communities and devastated the natural environment".

### **III. GROWTH OF ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN INDIA**

India is a land of rich biodiversity. The ancient literature and the Vedas have considered the earth as a mother. The noble prize winner Rabindranath Tagore in one of his essays *Tapovan* writes: "Indian civilisation has been distinctive in locating its source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest, not the city. India's best ideas have come where man was in communion with trees and rivers and lakes, away from the crowds. The peace of the forest has helped the intellectual evolution of man. The culture of the forest has fuelled culture of Indian society. The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life, which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, thus became the principle of Indian civilisation".

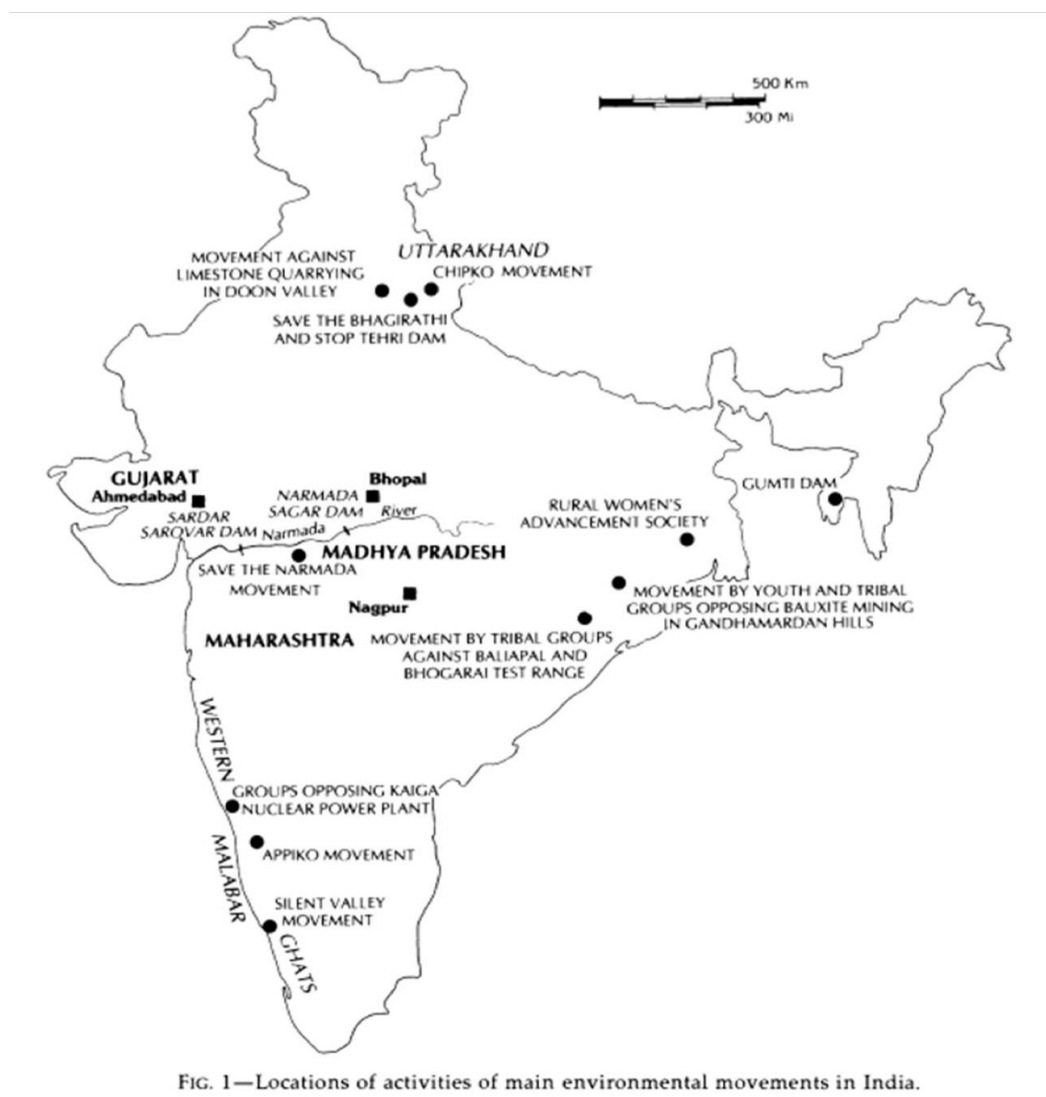
Natural surroundings and the environment has always been a part of the intrinsic characteristic of Indian people. Even today significant amount of our population depends on natural resources like forests, rivers, land etc. for their livelihood and sustainability. Thus people have always come together to protect these resources. The Bishnois community in Rajasthan that dates back to the 15th century can be considered as the first environmentalist of India. Their guru Jambheshwar made it compulsory for them to 'not cut green trees' and 'be compassionate to all living beings'. He preached that environment is the vital source of human survival.

Centuries later it was only after the Chipko movement (1973) in Garhwal region in the state of Uttarakhand that environmental protests and activism gained momentum and the larger issues of forests, building dams, mining, pollution was being taken up by the activists and also the state became more conscious regarding these issues.

The Chipko movement was started on April 24, 1973, at Mandal in the Chamoli district of then Uttar Pradesh. The conflict, however, is much older. According to Karan (1994), "exploitation of the forest by outside entrepreneurs with governmental approval has been the source of conflict between Uttarakhand villages and the state forest department. This conflict, which includes violent incidents, dates to 1821, when the British instituted the Tribal Forest Settlements in Kumaon. The conflict has been accompanied by denial of forest use to the villagers who traditionally depend on its products" (p. 36). It is significant to note that the movement was mostly carried out by women participants. Thus we can say that the practice of environmental activism and protests is not new in India.

The grassroots environmental movements in India have only been increasing, from the Chipko movement in the north to the silent valley movement in the south and the Narmada dam movement in the west to the Gumati dam movement in the east. In 1973 another movement 'Save Silent Valley' emerged to preserve the evergreen tropical forest in the Palakkad district of Kerala from being flooded by the hydroelectric project. In 1984 after a decade of resistance, the valley was declared as Silent Valley National Park. A large number of environmental movements manifested in India especially during and after 1970s and 1980s, even before the advent of digital era.

Fig 1 shows the locations of the major environmental movements in India.



[Source: The above map has been reproduced from the article by Karan, P. P. (1994): 'Environmental Movements in India', American Geographical Society, Vol. 84, No. 1, p. 33]

The need for such movements grew after 1864 when the British took over India's forest covers and established their own forest department. They forced indigo plantations in eastern India and cotton plantations in western and southern India. This was followed by the Deccan movement for land and forest rights, however, they were regarded as part of the anti-colonial movement and the environmental message was subsumed.

This was one of the serious concern for the environmental activists. Pre-independence, the environment movements were submerged into the larger anti-colonial movements and after independence these movements were overshadowed by larger political and economic good of the country. Such movements were often termed as anti-development or anti-state. The core environmental issue often seemed to get dissolved in these debates.

Environmentalists feared being labelled as conservatives by some of the critiques. But the fight went on and gained momentum during the decades of 1970's and 80's. However, not much can be said about the success rate of these movements. Movements like Narmada Bachao Andolan have been going on for about three decades now. The Movement started in 1985, against the construction of dams on the Narmada River which led to the displacement of more than 2 lakh people. The Protest is over the resettlement and rehabilitation of these indigenous people. Since the demonstration is against the government and giant corporates, people lack the resources and proper guidance to fight their battle. However several activists, journalists and noted celebrities have shown their support for such movements and helped place it on the national agenda.

Guha and Gadgil further suggest that these conflicts originate from development itself. On one hand, the resources are used to produce goods and commodities for the rich whereas the poor have to suffer the social and economic cost of these developments. Indigenous people are being displaced from their lands and given to corporates to build their big hotels or build dams. Millions of people are being sacrificed for the profits of few. Guha (2013) agrees that, "India today is an environmental basket-case; marked by polluted skies, dead rivers, falling water-tables, ever-increasing amounts of untreated wastes, disappearing forests. Meanwhile, tribal and peasant communities continue to be pushed off their lands through destructive and carelessly conceived projects. A new Chipko movement is waiting to be born".

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change launched the 'Environmental Education, Awareness and Training (EEAT)' in 1982-84 to make people understand about the levels of relationship between human beings and to improve people's participation for preservation and conservation of the environment. National Environment Awareness Campaign (NEAC) was launched in 1986 by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) which is a multi-media campaign that uses both conventional and non-conventional methods of communication for disseminating environmental messages to different target groups. This campaign is conducted every year on significant themes which is selected by the Ministry. The theme for 2016-17 is 'Swachh Bharat Mission, Ganga Rejuvenation and River Cleaning'.

Media has also played a responsible role in spreading awareness. India's leading TV channel NDTV launched the NDTV-Toyota Green campaign in April 2008, a nationwide campaign to save the environment. As part of this campaign, NDTV organised India's first Telethon in 2009 - The Greenathon, which was a 24-hour live fund-raising event aimed at providing support to TERI's Lighting a Billion Lives initiative that focusses on bringing solar power to villages without electricity. Zee Media Corporation Ltd also launched 'My Earth My Duty' campaign in 2010 to sensitise people against the threats posed by the Environmental degradation, to start a discourse on environmental issues and bring about a behavioural change in the public towards the Environment.

In the year 2001-02, The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change launched the NGC initiative (National Green Corps) which aims at motivating young children to work towards environment conservation and sustainable development. The response has been phenomenal, more than 1,00,000 Eco clubs have become operational across the country and work at the grassroots level.

#### **IV. SOCIAL MEDIA AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM**

Media has certainly been a helping hand in the environmental movements. Media has transformed some of these grassroots movements into nationwide movements. It is making people across the country aware of our environmental issues. Media has itself become a tool for environmental activism. While the efforts of the traditional media can't be ignored, Online technologies and social media platforms have also proved successful in environmental campaigns.

Kutner (2000) also agrees, "the use of Internet-based technologies by environmental justice activists has already been anecdotally demonstrated to be effective for access, use, dissemination, and creation of information resources". Activist organisations are interested in these online platforms that provides them with an alternate public space. Groups like Move On, Avaaz, change.org, Get Up among others have an online community of over millions. These platforms have proven that even small actions like liking or sharing a post, signing online petitions, twitter hashtags can contribute to massive change. India Water Portal is one such website that provides knowledge and aims to build communities around water related issues in India. The portal is managed by Arghyam, and has an archive of reports, data, events and all discussions related to water issues in India. Its main aim is to conserve our depleting water resources.

The technologies have helped the localised environment campaigns into a world wide movement. Vietnam Forum for Environmental Journalists, established in October 1998, is an organisation for those interested in environmental journalism and environment conservation. The Formosa environmental disaster saw a nationwide online protest against Taiwan's Formosa Plastics Corp. In April 2016, marine life began washing up and within weeks more than 200 km of coastline had been polluted, this led a massive Facebook campaign. Pictures and videos of dead fish flooded social media, pictures of people with banners saying "Who has brought Formosa here to poison Vietnam?" were being shared, hashtags like #IChooseFish, or the Vietnamese version, #toichonca were being used to mobilise support. Environmental activist Nguyen Huynh That believes that the Formosa steel plant ecological disaster "generated a social protest against an unchecked industrial development and signaled a new wave of environmentalism through Facebook postings."

Ola, an Indian online transportation network company, celebrated World Earth Day by creating an animated campaign titled #ShareForEarth to spread awareness about carbon emission. The Media Alliance also conducted a regional campaign using both traditional and online media to raise awareness about issues of climate change using the tagline 'Redraw the Line'. During 2010-14 the campaign was covered Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and Bangladesh. In March 2013 Greenpeace India launched Greenpeace Extra or GPx, a free on-

line petition site that allows anyone to start and run campaigns on issues that impact their community and mobilise and gather support to bring environmental or social change. P. Sadashiv the President of the walkers association of Lalbagh in Bangalore, started an online petition on GPx to save the 240 acre park from construction of an unnecessary parking lot within its premises. The campaign received more than 2000 online signatures within 3 weeks, which helped them stop the construction of parking lot.

Internet has drastically lowered participation costs and even allows for individuals to make smaller contributions that might lead to bigger impacts. Fisher and Boekkooi's (2010) study of the 2007 Step It Up National Day of Climate Action demonstrated how highly motivated people may seek out interests on the Internet: 60 percent of those who learned about the event online traveled alone to the event, as opposed 26 percent of those who organized via 12 face-to-face channels; and more than a third of all 454 survey respondents said they learned about the event via e-mail, an e-mail listserv, or Web site.

In 2010, Nestle's Kitkat suffered a huge blow when Environmental Group Greenpeace attacked them for destroying the natural habitat of Orangutan in the rainforests of Indonesia. They used social media campaigns like "give the rainforest a break" and "KillerKit Kat" which forced Nestle to end their partnership with Sinar Mas, their palm oil supplier in Indonesia. This incident was a PR nightmare for Nestle. Greenpeace later stated that Twitter buzz was overwhelming, Between 13th March to 22nd March, 2010 there were more than 2 lakhs related tweets. This led to positive environmental change and Nestle promised that it will now use only Certified Sustainable Palm Oil. Thus, social media helped bring down this huge conglomerate.

There is another side to this story. Many scholars have argued that the use of online media for such protests and campaigns is not very effective and is often hyped. They have challenged the credibility of the web based protests. Leeder (2007) points out that, "One of the realities of online environmental activism is competition-for attention, support, and funds. Small organizations who maintain a strong local presence in their region are dwarfed on the Web by well-funded national groups. Organizations working for environmental causes are finding that although distributing information is cheaper and easier than ever, getting their message heard through the cacophony of communication and media may be more challenging. Plus, some of the current favoured strategies for online activism, such as electronic petitions and email campaigns, are proving to be far less effective than previously hoped".

According to Castells, one of the biggest problems of online activism is logistical; not all people have access to the internet, the target audience is very selective. Thus it is a strong debate from both the sides. It is very difficult to take a stand on whether the coming of online technologies and social media has created a significant contribution to the ongoing environmental protests and campaigns. It is true that it has provided an alternate space and has been quite successful in few cases but it cannot be universalised.

## V. CONCLUSION

The Internet has certainly revolutionised the way people protest or voice their opinions. Major political and social changes have come as a result of online activism, for example, Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, Kony 2012 among others have proved to be highly successful. When it comes to the environment, online activism is still in its nascent stage. However, it is due to the efforts of the activists that several environmental issues like climate change, global warming, pollution, deforestation and others are being debated and discussed. Taking an online action offline is a big challenge. Not all online protests are impactful, even if its repercussion in the real world is small, it makes a huge difference and gives a direction to move forward. It is important to realise that people are better informed and hence better decision makers because of the internet. This is the real victory for online activists.

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