

Reporting the Environment and Human Rights: Journalism in India

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Abstract: *India has a great history of various successful environment movements. But every environment conflicts are not only the human negligence towards the environment. Often it became the conflict between two or more competing interest over the natural resources. In those conflicts, poor and minority people pushed to the margins who are generally victimized by the so called 'developmental' project of society. This paper takes a deep insight how major environmental movements of India became the human rights movement of poor marginalised communities. It considers major environmental movements of India and analysis its journalistic discourse on human rights of marginalised people.*

Keywords: *Environment, human rights, environmental movement, marginalised people, media coverage*

I. INTRODUCTION

"We must go through a natural revolution if we are to survive on earth. We need to change peopl's perceptions. If there's no environment, there's no human race. We are in a state of global denial."- Ted Turner, CNN Founder

Environmental degradation became a major issue of each and every individual and society. The rapid industrialization, population growth, economic development leads to enormous environment hazards throughout the world. If we look closely, environment degradation is not only the result of human negligence towards environment, but often the conflict between two or more competing interest over the natural resources. In those conflicts, poor and minority people pushed to the margins who are generally victimized by the so called 'developmental' project of society. As Stuart Hall (Hall, 1986, p. 9) observes:

"Some things, people, events, relationships always get represented: always centre-stage, always in the position to define, to set the agenda, to establish the terms of the conversation. Some others sometimes get represented – but always at the margin, always responding to a question whose terms and conditions have been defined elsewhere never 'centred'. Still others are always 'represented' only by their eloquent absence, their silences or refracted through the glance or the gaze of others".

The word 'environment' is derived from the French word '*Environner*' which means to encircle or surround. As per the law of Environment (Protection) Act of 1986, environment include all the biological and physical surroundings of an organism along with their interactions. In his book *Environmental Studies*, A. K. Kaushik defined Environment as "the sum total of water, air and land and the inter-relationships that exist among them and with the human beings, other living organisms and materials"(Kaushik, Sep 2007)

II. ENVIRONMENT AND RIGHTS OF PEOPLE

In India, development continued with the power flow of native elites to bureaucrats who took the charge of resource management under the shadow of the new ruling class (Mitra, 2011). It is also argued that in India, the environment struggle is generally the power pressure of others over the local natural resources or the environment. As a result, poor and marginalised people continued to struggle and more powerful people tried to 'tore the heart of state owned and managed forests with impunity' (Nambiar, 2014, p. 92). So, it is very difficult to separate environment issues and rights of people. Because the critical issue is whose development is being discussed (Pillai & Remesh, 2012). Most of the cases conflict occurs when powerful people try to commercialize the natural resources without granting its people. That's why more natural resourceful states have more poor people.

III. ENVIRONMENT AND MEDIA

It has been accepted that media helps to mobilise support, shape norms, instigate behaviour change, influence policy on various social issues which is very much important in any democratic country (Wilkins,

2003). For any public discourse or political process of any issue, media coverage played a very critical role. Mass media have been attributed an important role for the higher awareness of environmental issues also (Poornananda, 2008). People experience its environment through media which unconsciously shapes their lives (Boycoff, 2009). The book *Environment Risk and Media*, explores the ways in which environmental risks, threats and hazards are represented, transformed and contested by the media. At a time when popular conceptions of the 'environment' as a stable, 'natural' world with which humanity interferes are being increasingly challenged, the media's methods of encouraging audiences to think about environmental risks (Allan, Adam, & Carter). Even, general public knowledge about the environment is articulated and circulated by mass media (Chapman, Kumar, Fraser, & Gaber, 1997). So, Journalistic discourse is very much important in shaping the public agenda and discourse. But everyday steady news does not allow people to know the issue. Thus, intensive media coverage can act as a catalyst by directing the public attention over some social issues (Paimre & Loit, 2011). In India, media has given people that sphere to create opinion, argue regarding any issue.

IV. MAJOR ENVIRONMENT MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

India in its past years has experienced many great and successful environment movements where poor or the marginalised people won the battle. It was not the bed of roses. But they won because of their passion, commitment towards environment and nature where they are getting their livelihood. If we examine the history of various Indian environment movements, it would show that they were the battle against the dominant development paradigm.

- ***ChipkoAndolon***

If we start the chronology of environmental movements in India, Chipko andolon of the 1970s will come first. Sundarlal Bahuguna led Chipko Andolon was against the massive deforestation in Garhwal Himalayas when State Forest Department tried to cut the trees. It was the Gandhian method of satyagraha and non-violent resistance by hugging trees to protect them from being felled. The movement was started in Uttarakhand of Garhwal Himalayas when a group of women in Reni Village of Chamoli District, Uttarakhand hugged tree from being felled and reclaim their traditional forest rights. Women brought a deeper link between nature and livelihood. The environmental discourse of this movement has been termed 'eco-feminist' by activist Vandana Shiva (Shiva, 1989). The movement inspired hundreds of people in the region to protect their trees. By 1980s the movement had spread all over India which led the formulation of forest policies to prevent the open felling of trees (Hedge, 2010)

- ***Narmada BachaoAndolon***

The Narmada Valley Development Plan was most challenging plan in India. The Narmada River traverses through three states: Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. In 1978, under the Narmada Valley Development Project, Govt. of India proposed to build 30 large dams, 135 medium dams and 3000 small dams with assistance of World Bank. In the state Gujarat, "Sardar Sarovar Project" (SSP) is one of the most controversial large dams. The 1000,000 square kilometres spread Narmada basin is home of 20 million people, mostly tribal and dalits. 455 foot high reservoir would submerge nearly 37,000 hectares of land in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Mharashtra. Sardar Sarovar Dam alone has displaced 320,000 people with flora and fauna of the valley. Since early 1980s, the project has faced much opposition. (Suyoggothi, 2013)

- ***Niyamgiri lesson***

In 2003, Govt. of Odisha signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) with UK based Vedanta Resources to build an alumina refinery and coal thermal power plant in Lanjigarh at the foot top of Niyamgiri hills of Kalahandi district, Odisha (Mishra, 2011). Vedanta Resources wanted to set up open cast mine in the top of the hill Niyamgiri. These hills are home of Dongria Kondh tribals(Choudhury C. , 2014). "Niyamgiri is an area of densely forested hills, deep gorges and cascading streams. To be a Dongria Kondh is to farm the hills' fertile slopes, harvest their produce, and worship the mountain god Niyam Raja and the hills he presides over, including the 4,000 metre Mountain of the Law, Niyam Dongar" ("We'll lose our soul, Niyamgiri is our soul', 2013). So the tribe protests against the mining of bauxite in the hill. They blocked road, made human chain to protect their hill. Their protest spread locally, nationally and internationally. In 2013, Supreme Court of India told Vedanta Resources that the Dongria must decide whether they want mining in hill or not. The Dongria answered 'NO'.

- ***POSCO Movement***

Dhinkia and Gobindpur village of Odisha hold up country's biggest FDI worth of rupees 52,000 crore project of Pohang Iron and Steel Company (POSCO), multinational steel making company. More than 4000 families would be affected by the project. Those people are directly dependent on the betel vine cultivation, pisciculture, cashew nut cultivation and fishing. Beside this, these areas are covered with dense forest with wide variety of

flora and fauna. POSCO Pratirodh Sangram Samiti peacefully protested to protect their life and livelihood (Singh, 2014).

V. MEDIA COVERAGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Mass media play an important role in shaping public perception about the environment and also affects the attitudes and actions (Cox, 2006). In this, beside the mainstream media, entertainment media are an important source of information about the environment (Anderson, 1997). In most of the environmental movements, conflict was between have and have not's. India has a very rich nature related culture. Many people depend on the environment for their livelihood. So if we look back at the various Indian environmental movements, we can see that environment and human rights of marginalized and poor people merged up. Chipko movement is a classic example of environment movement which gets huge national and international media coverage. The movement was launched by women of the village which was reported by the Hindi press. "It was Anupam Mishra, a freelance journalist who reported the historic event" (Hedge, 2010). Soon national dailies took up the issues and wrote which attracted international attention. The European and Scandinavian media also covered the movement for Gandhian approach of this movement. Sooner world started talking about the movement which inspired many other movements throughout the world like Apikko movement in South India. Same cases in point could be the protest launched by the Kondh community against bauxite mining in Niyamgiri hills and the anti-POSCO movement of Odisha. Basic Human right is being violated when people deprived their livelihood, what happened in Narmada Andolon. The project was depriving many people who are mostly poor and dalits without any proper resettlement and rehabilitation. "The Narmada Bachaoo Andolan which originated as an environmental movement became a human rights movement" (Arif, 2000, p. 167). The campaign against the construction of dams on the Narmada River is "symbolic of a global struggle for social and environmental justice" (Suyoggothi, 2013). As noted by Medha Patkar upon her release from jail on August 6, 2007: "It's obvious that the Government [of Madhya Pradesh] is all out to kill our right to land and also [our] right to agitate" (Patkar, 1995). In India, many people especially tribal communities fully dependent on the forest and nature. Their economy, society even their very existence depend on the environment. As Kondh lady acclaimed "If we have hills we can live for generations. Every day we find free jackfruits, mangoes, bamboo, oranges. But without Niyamgiri we'll die." ("We'll lose our soul, Niyamgiri is our soul", 2013). Economy of any tribe depends on the environment it has (Fernandes, Menon, & Viegas, 1988). This scenario also can be traced other environmental hazards like in mining areas. In Bellary of Karnataka state rice people became richer with iron mining, but the poor people are facing the aftermath of the mining. Resident and farmer of Bellary, Holi Kunte was so upset to see the red rust color of rainwater reservoir of that area that "... the water that once irrigated our farms. Our lands and waters are being polluted, and our forests destroyed." (Choudhury C. , 2009)

So, in various ways environment degradation due to popular development paradigm affected the basic human rights to live properly of the poor, marginalised people of rural India. Unlike the west, environmental discourse of India more with the human centred sustainability like equity and social justice which affect marginalised human communities (Sanford & Shiva, 2012)

VI. CONCLUSION

So, from the above discussion, we can clearly understand that environmental movement of India not only a voice for better environment but also a living testimony of those poor marginalised people who are being cheated in many and various way by the power holder or the 'have' group of society. So the victory of every environment movement are actually the victory of those people who don't have much access of so call 'development', but have their own faith and commitment towards their nature. And in this every victory media play a important role as an facilitator of democracy.

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