



Krishna Mallick

Environmental Movements of India

Chipko
Narmada Bachao Andolan
Navdanya

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Environmental Movements of India



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*Dedicated to my granddaughter, Meera,
who is growing up in an environmentally challenging world*



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Acknowledgments

The idea of writing a book about the grassroots environmental movements of India had occurred to me for a long time, since I have been teaching the course *Environmental Ethics* for many years. In teaching this course, I have always devoted the last two or three classes to some of the grassroots environmental movements of India. I searched many times for a supplementary textbook but couldn't find one that covered some of these movements. It is this desire to have a book that led me to write the book proposal.

I am grateful to my colleague, Dr. Severin Kitanov in the Philosophy Department at Salem State University, who helped me to bring this book to fruition. Dr. Kitanov read my entire manuscript and gave me extensive comments to improve the quality of the content. My heartfelt thanks to him for the many hours he spent reading and commenting at every phase of the book.

I want to thank my students, from whom I have learned so much over the course of many years. I also came to know about their interests in and curiosity about environmental issues in India, as they don't hear or read about them in the mainstream media.

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Above all, I am grateful to my husband, Subir, for his encouragement and patience.





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Foreword

Frances Moore Lappé

I promise that you will feel better after reading this book. Bringing to life underappreciated social movements that have made a huge, positive difference in our world, *Environmental Movements of India* is a gift. It is needed now more than ever. Krishna Mallick's profound passion for global environmental justice shines throughout as it brings to life key environmental movements in India.

Dr. Mallick's expertise in both Eastern and Western philosophy along with her background in environmental studies, women's studies, and peace studies bring a unique perspective to our understanding of the sources, range, and impact of environmental activism.

The three environmental movements of India that Dr. Mallick explores have developed over the last 50 years and reveal significant, fascinating differences between Eastern environmentalism and its Western counterpart. In an era obsessed with economic growth and dangerously blind to environmental sustainability, this book shows how the voice of the disadvantaged is key in reducing social inequities that are worsening worldwide.

Environmental Movements of India gives voice to those who are not in a position of authority and power but who have still made an impact not only at the national level in India but also on an international and global scale.

Dr. Mallick's chosen case studies – the Chipko movement, the NBA, and Navdanya – demonstrate the profound inspiration of strong, Indian environmental ethics that have sustained environmental movements over many decades. At the same time, they showcase the potential of such ethics to provide principles for an alternative framework for global struggles in environmental conservation. A critical contribution of the author is bringing to light their roots in a philosophical framework that ranges from the heritage of Mahatma Gandhi to various environmental movements manifesting enduring environmental ethics. Furthermore, her analysis reflects a deep familiarity with the relevant literature on the debate about environmental vs. economic development.

The history of the Chipko, NBA, and Navdanya movements matters not only because of what these movements have accomplished in India. The leaders and followers of the movements have also embodied the ideals of the Gandhian method of *satyagraha*. When peoples' very survival and livelihood were threatened by destructive economic forces, Gandhian



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satyagraha offered a powerful model of resistance against injustice and oppression. The Indian government was eventually forced to come to terms with the demands of the movements, which, in turn, made a global impact.

The Western world can thus learn valuable lessons from the experience of these Indian environmental movements. Most importantly, Dr. Mallick has clearly demonstrated that ethics and morality cannot be ignored simply because no law has been violated. The protection of human beings and nature must always be the centerpiece of making economic policy.

The stories of the leaders and followers of the three movements call out to readers to do much more to ensure that all stakeholders – in India and across all nations – are present at the table and to acknowledge the primacy of environmental sustainability and social justice as well as the necessity of treating those who suffer with the dignity that we all deserve.



Glossary

Note the different translations of Sanskrit terms.

<i>achit</i>	non-sentient matter
<i>adivasi</i>	indigenous people or tribal people or scheduled tribe
<i>ahimsa</i>	non-violence, non-injury
<i>anna swaraj</i>	food sovereignty
<i>aparigraha</i>	non-possessiveness
<i>artha</i>	prosperity, accumulation of wealth (one of the aims of life)
<i>asteya</i>	non-stealing
<i>atman</i>	higher self
<i>Beej Bachao Andolan</i>	Seed Freedom Movement
<i>Bhagavad Gita</i> or <i>Gita</i>	Song of God
<i>bhakti</i>	devotion
<i>bhakti yoga</i>	way of devotion
<i>bij swaraj</i>	seed sovereignty
<i>brahmacharya</i>	chastity
<i>Brahman</i>	the Absolute
<i>Brahmin</i>	ascetic or priest caste
<i>chipko</i>	cling on to or hold on to (hug the trees)
<i>chit</i>	sentient matter
<i>darshan</i>	to see or vision, Sanskrit word for philosophy
<i>dharma</i>	righteousness or duty or moral code or social morality; literal meaning 'to uphold' or 'sustain' (one of the aims of life)
<i>Dharmashastras</i>	treatises on dharma
<i>gram swaraj</i>	village self-reliance
<i>gunas</i>	attributes of nature or matter
<i>Ishwarapranidhana</i>	Meditation of <i>Ishwara</i> or God
<i>jal swaraj</i>	water sovereignty
<i>jnana yoga</i>	way of knowledge
<i>kama</i>	fulfillment of desire, sensual desire (one of the aims of life)
<i>karma yoga</i>	way of action
<i>kshatriya</i>	warrior caste
<i>khadi</i>	homespun cotton



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<i>kuladharmā</i>	duty of the family
<i>moksha</i>	inner freedom or liberation or salvation (one of the aims of life)
<i>navdanya</i>	nine crops or seeds; the word 'nav' means new and the word 'daan' means gift or offering well-being of all creatures
<i>nishkama karma</i>	doing one's action without thinking about the consequences or doing one's action with detachment or non-attachment
<i>niyama</i>	discipline
<i>padayatra</i>	foot march
<i>prakriti</i>	nature or matter
<i>purusarthas</i>	four aims of life
<i>purusha</i>	the soul or self
<i>rajas</i>	energy or activity or being passionate (this is a <i>guna</i>)
<i>rakhees</i>	wrist bands used during festivals
<i>santoshā</i>	contentment
<i>sarvodaya</i>	welfare for all, universal uplift
<i>sattva</i>	purity or wisdom or lightness (this is a <i>guna</i>)
<i>satya</i>	truthfulness
<i>satyagraha</i>	truth-force or soul-force
<i>saucha</i>	cleanliness
<i>swadeshi</i>	honouring the local, homegrown
<i>swadharmā or</i>	common duty, duties that everyone is
<i>samanyadharmā</i>	required to follow
<i>swadhyaya</i>	habit of study or reflection
<i>swaraj</i>	self-rule, self-discipline
<i>tamas</i>	heaviness or darkness or inert or resistant (this is a <i>guna</i>)
<i>tapas</i>	stoic endurance of discomfort without complaint
<i>tapasya</i>	austerity, self-discipline
<i>van panchayats</i>	community forestry management
<i>varnadharma</i>	duty of the caste
<i>yama</i>	restraint

Introduction

Three Grassroots Movements That Made a Global Impact

Abstract

Three Indian environmental movements are analyzed – the Chipko movement of the 1970s against deforestation, Narmada Bachao Andolan in the 1980s against dam-building, and Navdanya, the contemporary movement against genetically modified organisms (GMOs) – from three dimensions: nonviolence, feminism, and environmentalism. Each of these movements has accomplished its goals, with Chipko achieving a 15-year ban on tree-cutting, NBA succeeding in slowing down the building of dams on the Narmada river through litigation with the help of the World Bank and still fighting for the resettlement and rehabilitation of the displaced people, and Navdanya promoting local organic seeds for small farmers in India whose rights have been violated by multinational corporations monopolizing GM crops. The three movements followed three principles: environmental justice, intergenerational equality, and respect for nature.

Keywords: environmental justice, intergenerational equality, respect for nature, globalization from below, globalization from above

Many people believe, and rightly so, that the main source of environmental destruction in the world is the demand for natural resources caused by consumption by the rich, whether nations, individuals, or groups. The positive message of this book is that poor communities have the power to accomplish economically and environmentally sound goals. In various parts of India over the last five decades, several social justice and environmental movements have been formed and continue to emerge. Environmental sustainability has been the primary goal of many of these movements, and my aim in this book is to provide detailed accounts of three such movements that had both a local and a global impact.

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The Chipko movement, with its focus on preventing deforestation; Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), which fought for the rights of villagers displaced by a dam; and the Navdanya movement, a seed repository of native varieties, together constitute a special triad in terms of the magnitude of their impact, their membership constituencies, and their lack of political affiliation. This book honours their contributions toward an ethics of 'globalization from below' as opposed to 'globalization from above'. In simple terms, globalization from below is the struggle against social exclusion that involves coming up with new initiatives that have both local and global impacts. By contrast, globalization from above – neoliberalism – helps to maximize capitalist efficiency and economic growth through free markets and policies that promote multinational companies' (deleterious) involvement in the resources of other countries.

The Chipko, NBA, and Navdanya movements significantly changed the development discourse by including not only people in power but also the disempowered and disadvantaged villagers whose lives were directly impacted by decisions made without their input. Each movement was led by one or two organizers and was followed by scores of people who protested the actions of the central and state Indian governments as well as the multinational and transnational companies that continue to coordinate with private industries in India with the help of the government. Generally speaking, these three grassroots movements have exercised significant pressure on the Indian government to modify or change its policies related to deforestation, dam-building, and food sovereignty.

The guiding purpose of my analysis is to present and make understandable for a variety of readers the voice of a developing country such as India, a voice that is very different from that of developed nations in general. More precisely, my aim is to help readers appreciate the nonviolent, feminist, and environmental dimensions of these three environmental movements. In each, the Gandhian principle of *satyagraha* – soul-force or truth-force – is employed in various ways. *Satyagraha* originates from the belief that while violence to persons and property diverts the minds of the parties from the real issues at hand, nonviolent action invites the parties to a dialogue about the issues themselves. Nonviolence (*ahimsa*) is not just the absence of violence (*himsa*). At the core of *satyagraha* is a commitment to the truth of a situation, surrounded by the suffering needed to induce a change of heart in the oppressor. A practitioner of nonviolence must be disciplined to face the inevitable suffering and possibility of death and must not use any form of violence in thought, speech, or action.



The preconditions for India's environmental movements are made clear in Chapter 1 with an overview of the numerous Forest Acts enforced by the British Raj before and briefly after India's independence. These Acts led to peasant protests and the emergence of a cultural leader in Mohandas K. Gandhi, who had returned to India after practicing law for two decades in South Africa, where he had been honoured with the name Mahatma. In the 1970s, Chipko activists were concerned with issues of social justice arising from the disproportionate use of forest resources by people in positions of authority and power. As described in Chapter 2, the movement became iconic worldwide for the nonviolent action taken by local women of hugging trees that had been marked for felling. Directly following independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru launched the Sardar Sarovar dam project as part of a vision of mass industrialization. Chapter 3 tells the story of Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), an anti-dam group that emerged in the 1980s. A pivotal moment in its history came when the NBA convinced the World Bank to withdraw its funding for the dam. Yet due to the powerlessness of displaced people, the harm done has been significant and complex.

Amid the debate over genetically modified organisms (GMOs), Chapter 4 begins with a look back at the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. The resulting monoculture crops have eliminated the choices available to local small farmers. Following an estimated 300,000 farmer suicides, movements arose to challenge development models based on efficiency alone. Chapter 4 highlights the work of Navdanya, a seed repository that works directly with local farmers to promote biodiverse organic crops and the concept of food sovereignty. Chapter 5 presents the philosophical and moral underpinnings of environmental movements. I delve further into Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, consider the forces of globalism, and examine the six core values of development ethics. As each of the movements covered in this volume demonstrates, ecofeminist principles offer a path away from neoliberalism and toward meeting the basic needs of local people by providing them with access to their natural resources. The final chapter makes the case for Hindu ethics of *dharma* being the foundation of Hinduism and its relation to the sacredness of nature as depicted in many Hindu scriptures. An integration of the eco-friendly nature of Hinduism with environmental awareness is necessary in this Anthropocene era. Concluding that the symbiosis of natural resources and local needs is the ethical goal, I re-examine the three movements through the theoretical lenses of global environment ethics, feminist care ethics, and the capabilities approach.



Five decades later, all three movements remain relevant. The spirit of Chipko is alive in a global movement to ensure women's sovereign rights to natural forest resources. In August 2019, NBA founder Medha Patkar and six supporters participated in a hunger strike to compel authorities to open the sluice gates of the Sardar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat. The Navdanya seed repository, founded by eco-activist Vandana Shiva, is thriving in India and has been adopted as a model by developing nations worldwide.

Principles of Environmental Philosophy

As the discipline of environmental studies is not limited to any specific academic field, this work can be characterized as interdisciplinary, at the intersection of women's studies, environmental studies, peace studies, philosophy, and the emerging field of ecological economics. Specialists in any of these fields as well as general readers will find valuable lessons and insights here, as each of the environmental movements is brought into sharp relief by means of an extensive review of the critical literature. Because people's voices are value-oriented, it is also instructive to identify and explicate the normative principles underpinning these movements, as Tongjin Yang argues in his 2006 article 'Towards an Egalitarian Global Environmental Ethics'.

(1) Environmental Justice

Different studies have shown that the cost of environmental degradation is largely borne by the economically disadvantaged people both within and across countries. The principle of environmental justice – and its related outcome, social justice – demands that the powerless and disadvantaged in society change the injustices caused by the people in power in a nonviolent way, compelling them to move in a positive direction.

(2) Intergenerational Equality

Every future generation deserves the basic right to a healthy and livable environment. This means that every present generation has the responsibility or duty to leave the earth in a state that is politically and economically just as well as sustainable for future generations to be able to live with basic rights.



(3) **Respect for Nature**

The integrity and biodiversity of nature must be preserved at any cost. As human beings are part of nature, it is essential for them to follow the laws of nature. Respect for nature means that humans should not take away society's resources to give themselves an economic advantage. This requires a sea change from a discourse on economic development to one on sustainability, as the Earth is in crisis now. We must, therefore, carry out our duty to care for it.

