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# ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA: SOME REFLECTIONS

V. Ratna Reddy

*This paper is an attempt to understand the reasons behind the popularity/success or failure of movements in contemporary India, which have environmental concerns as their objective at one stage or other. Against the backdrop of contemporary popular movements, this paper argues that the present trend is not healthy as the movements fail to integrate environment and development. Despite the rise in the number of movements and conflicts over environmental issues, concern for environment has remained peripheral for most of the contemporary movements. Though it is obvious that environmental issues get snowed under developmental issues at the grassroots and policy levels, the contemporary movements also seem to fail in addressing ecological aspects. The approach of these movements in India ought to be different from that of their counterparts in the developed countries. The environmental groups and the state need not always work at cross-purposes; they also can work in tandem in addressing the pressing problems.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concern for the present day environmental problems in most of the developing countries like India is of relatively recent origin. Even the recent awareness and concern for environmental protection at the policy level are donor-induced and, at the grassroots level, it is due to efforts by individuals and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In the absence of ground level awareness and concern, environmental aspects have remained, more or less, peripheral to the contemporary social movements in India. Some of the contemporary movements, however, acquired the status of ecological or environmental movements in retrospect as these movements have widened their focus from basic survival needs to ecological concerns [Sethi, 1993; Gadgil and Guha, 1994]. In general these movements are often grouped under tribal or peasant movements [Shah, 1990] and also under new social movements [Omvedt, 1993; Wignaraja, 1993]. Some even title them as middle class or elitist movements [Shah, 1990; Sethi, 1993], the reasons being that ecological aspects are linked with the problems associated with peasants and tribals whose survival is attached to the status of natural resources, and that the problems or demands of the tribal as well as non-tribal poor are often articulated by the urban middle class and the elite. In the context of coalition between the affected people and the middle class spokespersons, the

real issues tend to get clouded as the debate is drawn into different forums in order to attract national and international attention [Sethi, 1993].

Environmental movements in India, therefore, are not necessarily for the 'green' or 'clean' earth or for saving mankind's heritage and endangered species as in the West, but for the very survival of the local poor [Rao, 1994]. Even among these ecological movements, only a few can claim success in achieving some of their objectives. On the other hand, the overwhelming popularity or coverage received by some of these movements overshadows the importance of other environmental problems which may be equally, if not more, strident. And the success of the movement is often linked with its popularity rather than the importance of the issue.

This paper is an attempt to understand the reasons behind the popularity/success or failure of those movements in contemporary India, which have environmental concerns as their objective at one stage or other. Some of the relevant questions in this regard are: (i) what are the characteristics of and conditions for successful movements in contemporary India?; (ii) to what extent do these movements address the environmental concerns in different circumstances?; and (iii) what are the factors other than environmental concerns that led to the success or failure of these movements?

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Though the extent of local support is vital for the success of any grassroots level movement, one hardly finds that the initiative for environmental protection in India comes from the people concerned. These concerns are articulated by the spokespersons to attract wider support, internal as well as external support like NGOs, donor agencies, etc. So far, the experience is that environmental groups are often at logger heads with the state whose actions in a democratic set up are supposed to reflect people's demands and aspirations. Unless the thrust for environmental movements comes from the people concerned, it is unlikely that these movements would address the broader ecological dimensions of development which remained peripheral to these movements. This aspect, however, is given due importance in the case of a few micro-level movements where sustainable development is the main objective. And the results or achievements of these movements are exemplary. It is likely that the type of environmental issues addressed by contemporary movements would be different, if the initiative comes entirely from the people concerned. Besides, the sustenance of the movements depends on people's support although their popularity may come from leadership and external support.

With a view to understanding the nature and direction of modern environmental movements in India, an attempt is made in this paper to reflect on the experience of some of the important and popular movements. The discussion is carried out separately for popular movements and micro level movements. It may be noted that popular movements are not necessarily synonymous with macro or country-wide movements. These movements can be termed as macro only in terms of their popularity rather than their support base (or affected regions). While the main objective of the macro movements is to influence the policy, the micro level movements aim at result-oriented sustainable development practices. Our main focus here is on the reasons for their success or popularity rather than on their achievements. This paper is divided into five sections. The following section deals with the characteristics and concerns of some important popular movements

while section three examines why some movements are popular. Section four presents the approach and concerns of micro level movements and the last section reflects on experience of these movements in addressing the basic social objectives *vis-a-vis* environmental concerns.

## II. THE POPULAR MOVEMENTS

The origin of modern environmentalism and environmental movements in India can be ascribed to the *Chipko* movement in the central Himalayan region in the early 1970s. *Chipko* movement, launched to protect the Himalayan forests from destruction, has its roots in the pre-Independence days. Many struggles were organised to protest against the colonial forest policy during the early decades of the twentieth century. The main demand of the people in these protests was that the benefits of the forest, especially the right to fodder, should go to local people [Bahuguna, 1990]. These struggles have continued in the post-Independence era as the forest policies of independent India are no different from those of the colonial days. However, the origin of *Chipko* (*chipak jana* - to hug) dates back to the year 1973. In early 1973, the forest department refused to allot ash trees to the Dashauli Gram Swarajya Sangha (DGSS), a local cooperative organisation based in Chamoli district, for making agricultural implements. On the other hand, the forest department allotted ash trees to a private company, i.e., Symonds Company. This incident provoked the DGSS to fight against this injustice through lying down in front of timber trucks and burning resin and timber depots as was done in the Quit India movement. When these methods were found unsatisfactory, Chandi Prasad Bhat, one of the leaders, suggested embracing the trees to prevent them from being cut. With its success, the movement has spread to other neighboring areas, and then onwards the movement is popularly known internationally as *Chipko* movement. Only during the 1970s this, (now *Chipko*) movement started tending towards concentrating on ecological issues, such as depletion of forest cover and soil erosion.



*Chipko* movement with its wide following and success, though modest in achieving some of its objects, can be termed as a watershed in environmental movements in India. This, in fact, kindled attention to the environmental aspects of development and gave rise to numerous conflicts and protests over natural resources and ecological issues. However, despite numerous forest-based movements during the last two decades in India, none of them had attracted public support or influenced the state policies as much as *Chipko* did. This may be attributed to three important aspects of the *Chipko* movement. First, there is the close link between the livelihoods of the local people and the nature of the movement. The local people consider *Chipko* as a fight for basic subsistence denied to them by the institutions and policies of the state [Guha, 1989]. In addition, the specificity of the region, along with involvement of women in the contribution to household's subsistence and the anti-alcohol campaign, has led to the overwhelming support of women which is unique to the *Chipko* movement. Moreover, as aptly described by Guha [1989, p. 178] the 'private' face of *Chipko* is more a peasant movement, while its public profile is seen as an environmental movement. Further, it has a face of women's movement as well [Omvedt, 1993]. It is interesting to note that in the later stages when *Chipko* ceased to go beyond environmental concerns, i.e., limiting itself to protecting and conservation of trees, the problems started surfacing.

The second aspect is with regard to the nature of agitation. Unlike other environmental movements *Chipko* has strictly adhered to the Gandhian tradition of freedom struggle, i.e., non-violence. To quote Guha, 'there is the veneer of Gandhianism with which *Chipko* is cloaked, a matter of some embarrassment for a state claiming to be the rightful successor of the freedom struggle and upholding Gandhi as the Father of Nation. In this manner *Chipko* has, knowingly or unknowingly, successfully exploited the ambiguities in the dominant ideology of the Indian state' [Guha 1989, p. 177].

Thirdly, the simplicity and sincerity of the leaders like Sunderlal Bahuguna and their access to national leaders like Indira Gandhi and other politicians and officials also helped the success of the movement to a large extent.

Despite its popularity and success, *Chipko* movement is still considered to be incomplete and modest as, in the later stages, it limited itself to ecological aspects of protecting trees with the neglect of local people's requirements. In fact, to start with, *Chipko* movement has had six demands - only one of which is complete stoppage of commercial cutting of trees. The other demands include the following: (i) on the basis of minimum needs of the people, a reorganisation of traditional rights should take place; (ii) arid forest should be made green with people's participation and increased tree cultivation; (iii) village committees should be formed to manage forests; (iv) forest-related home-based industries should be developed and the raw materials, money and technique for them should be made available; and (v) based on local conditions and requirements, local varieties should be given priority in afforestation [Mukul, 1993]. The recent evidence shows that due to the neglect of eco-development linkages (markets, techniques, forest based industries), the objective of ameliorating the conditions of local people in these regions has remained a distant dream. If the situation continues, viz., increasing threat to the livelihood of local people, it may jeopardise the achievements of the *Chipko* movement which may lose the people's support. In fact, the closing down of local industries has resulted in most entrepreneurs, who are attached to the movement, feeling alienated from it [Mukul, 1993, p. 621].

The other popular movements of importance in India, which have environmental protection as one of their objectives, relate to major dams. Notable among them are Tehri Dam, Silent Valley Project and Narmada Valley Project. The longest struggle among the anti-big dam protest struggles was the opposition to Tehri dam, being constructed on the river Bhageerathi in the Garhwal region. The Tehri Baandh Virodhi Sangharsha Samithi (Committee for the Struggle against the



Tehri Dam), founded by veteran freedom fighter Veerendra Datta Saklani, has been opposing the construction for more than a decade. The major objections include, seismic sensitivity of the region, submergence of forest areas along with Tehri town, etc; [for details, see D'Monte, as quoted in Gadgil and Guha, 1994, p. 111]. Despite the support from other prominent leaders like Sunderlal Bahuguna, the movement has failed to gather enough popular support at national as well as international levels and the government is determined to complete the project. For, according to the latest reports (various daily news papers during May-June 1995), the construction of the dam is being carried out with police protection as Sunderlal Bahuguna is sitting on fast unto death. After the Prime Minister's assurance to review the project, Bahuguna ended his fast but construction goes on, though at a slower pace.

One of the early and complete successes of environmental movements was the abandonment of the Silent Valley hydro-electric project in Kerala.<sup>1</sup> The movement in relation to the Silent Valley project was organised by the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) in collaboration with wild life conservationists. In this project, however, there was no local people's involvement as there was no displacement of people. The movement was fought primarily on environmental grounds and mostly at the intellectual level. The major concerns of this movement were the adverse environmental impact on the Silent Valley, one of the last surviving natural tropical forests in India and protecting a rare breed of monkey, lion-tailed macaque. With the active support from the international organisations like World Wildlife Fund and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources the movement assumed international importance [Sethi, 1993]. Though it gained popularity and coverage, the ultimate success of the movement was attributed to the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's desire to enhance her image among the international conservation community [D'Monte as quoted in Gadgil and Guha, 1994, p. 112].

The most popular movement in the environmental history of India is the movement against the Narmada River Valley Project. Though the movement started as early as the late 1970s, along with the clearance of the project, it received momentum only during the late 1980s. To start with, this movement was centred around the issue of human rights. In fact, some of the main leaders of the movement at present like Medha Patkar were working towards proper rehabilitation programmes for the dam displaced. Due to improper implementation of the rehabilitation programmes by the state, the human rights activists have become the articulators of anti-dam protests. Their demands included complete stopping of the dam, resettlement and rehabilitation benefits to the oustees [Wood, 1993]. These demands were aptly supported by environmentalists who oppose construction of large dams for ecological reasons. The movement, however, gained wider public attention with mobilisation and organisation of oustees (mostly tribals) and the joining of the eminent social workers like Baba Amte, Sunderlal Bahuguna and Medha Patkar. Though its wider public attention is due to its coverage (impact) in three states, the most notable feature of this movement is the international support it has received. In fact, the main reason behind the World Bank's withdrawal of funding to the project was due to international pressures. To list a few instances: Japanese environmentalists persuaded their government in blocking the money advance for the project. Similarly, the US environmental groups have worked hard to stop World Bank funding [Gadgil and Guha, 1994, p. 173]. With this international support, the leaders of the movement received a sympathetic hearing from a US Congressional Sub-Committee. In the wake of the World Bank's independent review committee report, the European Parliament urged its member countries to instruct their World Bank directors to suspend all further aid to Sardar Sarovar and, in the final voting, all the donor countries voted against funding while poor recipient countries voted for continuation [Wood, 1993]. This kind of international support is something unprecedented in Indian environmental history. The completion of Narmada Valley Project is not directly linked with the



World Bank funding. Hence the success or failure of the movement is not linked with it. The Government is going ahead with the project irrespective of the World Bank funding. The ultimate success or failure of the movement will be reflected in the non-completion or completion (even with the suggested modifications) of the project. It is also unlikely that the project would remain half finished forever. On the other hand, without international pressures it would have been very difficult for the leaders of *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Save Narmada Agitation) to stop the World Bank funding on their own. Even this may be termed as only a partial success of the movement as the ultimate success lies in convincing or pressurising the government to stop the project with people's support, which is most unlikely in the present socio-economic conditions in India.

It is rather intriguing why 'Narmada' Valley Project became such a popular movement and received such a support from international environmental organisations, whereas environmental disasters like Union Carbide Gas tragedy at Bhopal<sup>2</sup> (which is also located in one of the Narmada states, i.e., Madhya Pradesh), where about 2,500 people have lost their lives while thousands become permanently disabled, failed to receive due attention, despite its potential for a mass movement. Though the case is being dragged on for years in Indian courts at the cost of victims' suffering, the incident somehow failed to capture the fancy of environmental groups. No political pressures whatsoever were brought on the US Government or for that matter on the Indian Government to make the Union Carbide pay the full compensation. In fact, the US and Indian Governments were trying to push the case into the other country's courts. While the US lobbied for the case to be settled in Indian courts as it amounts to lower compensation and less damage to Union Carbide, the Indian Government was doing the reverse, in order to get the maximum compensation. For, in the context of the case being settled in the US, Union Carbide's entire assets will be valued for compensation because the multinational corporation's headquarters are located there and hence the entire Union Carbide

Corporation will be held responsible. Whereas, in the case of Indian courts only Union Carbide of India will be held responsible rather than the Corporation in its entirety. Finally, in the absence of enough external pressures from environmental groups coupled with the Indian Government's weak bargaining power, the case was pushed to the Indian courts.

### III. WHY SOME MOVEMENTS ARE POPULAR?

At this juncture it is important to understand the characteristics and qualities of the movements that make them so popular as against others which are not. According to the standard definition of a social movement, it is a deliberate collective endeavour to bring change in any direction and by any means; it should have some degree of organisation and normative commitment and active participation on the part of its members [Shah, 1990, Pp. 16-17]. Movements with multi-stranded objectives and fast-changing priorities can sustain for longer periods. The cohesiveness of the movement in integrating multiple objectives without losing track of the ground level (initial) protests is vital for its success. Let us now analyse the movements discussed above in the light of these aspects. These movements have three distinct bases - *Chipko* with forest base; Silent Valley, Tehri and Narmada are big dam controversies, and Bhopal tragedy is urban-based. Here, we focus our discussion on the reasons for popularity of some of these movements.

The success or popularity of the *Chipko* movement can be attributed to its long history, multiple objectives which have changed over time, and committed leaders and their stature at local and national level. As the struggle against forest policy of the state had started during the pre-Independence time, it has accumulated over the period a wider local support base and provided a strong ground for the *Chipko* movement. *Chipko's* strength lies in its multiple objectives with a wide range, such as protecting the livelihoods of peasants, anti-liquor campaign, greening the hills in a sustainable fashion, etc. Over the time, the articulation of the problems has also changed. Due to this reason, *Chipko* is often titled



(confusedly) as peasant/ women's/ environmental movement. However, of late, the *Chipko* movement has tended to concentrate on ecological issues alone and, hence, started losing its popular base. Some of its early success can be attributed to the commitment of the leaders and their influence on common people as well as political leaders. But the same leadership (Sunderlal Bahuguna) could not have similar success in mobilising the people or convincing the state in the case of Tehri dam.

The absence of popular support in the case Tehri dam may be attributed to its more or less single objective which is rather ecological (seismic impact and submergence of forest lands). The people involved (people from Tehri town) are a non-homogeneous community with modern influences and life styles, unlike the tribals in the case of Narmada and, hence, difficult to mobilise. Similarly, in the case of Tehri, the approach of following different strategies for drawing the support of various national and international forums is missing. Besides, Tehri dam does not depend so much on external funding as is the case with Narmada.

While the success of the movement against Silent Valley project, without any grassroots support, is mainly of the intellectual nature, the popularity of Narmada has many dimensions. Narmada movement, like *Chipko*, has started with addressing the problems of livelihood of local people (tribals), traversed into human rights issues and focused on environmental concerns while suggesting alternative development paradigm. Interestingly, the strategy of the leadership has been to address all these dimensions simultaneously in an effective manner. To start with, its mass base is the dam-affected tribal communities which are homogeneous and removed from modern influence and hence easier to organise [Patkar, 1992]. Narmada agitation, apart from addressing different objectives, has been following different strategies to influence national and international forums, i.e., explaining things from one point of view to the human rights activists, and from another to the environmental groups, without losing touch with the local tribals

[Patkar, 1992]. Moreover, the activists are very much involved in the socio-economic development of the tribal communities, i.e., building schools, dispensaries, etc. The main reason for its international recognition is the time point at which the movement has started. *Narmada Andolan* had taken-off during the late 1980s when the North-South conflict regarding environmental issues had sharpened. Protecting the environment in the South has become one of the main agenda of the international policy of the North. This has led to the recognition and active support to Narmada agitation from governmental and non-governmental organisations abroad. This support in turn is instrumental in bringing pressure on the World Bank to stop the funding of the project, as it is anti-environment.

On the other hand, the Bhopal tragedy does not seem to have these qualities of a mass movement. It was a sudden tragedy engulfing a heterogeneous urban community. Moreover, the Bhopal Act by the Government of India was passed in March 1985 consolidating all claims arising out of Bhopal disaster and making the Government the only competent authority to represent the victims. This has left no space to mobilise people around the issue of livelihood. In the absence of any direct link between livelihood and environment, the latter was neither given due importance nor articulated. While the compensation issue (livelihood) was submerged due to the influence of the Government, the movement failed to become mass oriented due to the general attitude of the people that 'Government takes care of everything'. To put it differently, Government is viewed as a supporter of the cause. The issue has always been the compensation for the victims but never with regard to future policy on environmentally hazardous industries. For, at that particular point of time, any issue other than compensation would have drawn a blank in terms of local support. Therefore, environmental issues *per se* may not have the potential to draw mass response.



Similarly, examples abound where important environmental problems are neither articulated nor brought to fore by environmentalists in India, in order to bring any policy changes. No movements are organised with regard to urban or industrial pollution, despite the fact that quite a few lives are lost on a regular basis every year. In this regard, the recent trend of increased number of public litigation cases in the courts, pertaining to environmental problems, is a welcome sign. There were no attempts to popularise some of the important region-specific environmental problems, such as desertification, water logging or salinisation in various regions, which are equally harmful as submergence of forest areas under the Narmada reservoir. Surprisingly, the day to day state policies regarding environmental protection are hardly contested by the environmental groups in the country. For instance, in order to encourage small scale industry, it was recently exempted from pollution control law. The decision of the Environmental Ministry to close down thirteen sugar factories which are not adhering to the environmental regulations, despite several warnings, was ultimately waived by the Cabinet Committee which was headed by the Prime Minister himself. Ironically, no environmental group has protested against these policy decisions, nor did they receive any coverage in the press, except for stating the facts.

Despite recommendations from various committees, the state has failed to address the most pressing demand of the Indian agricultural sector, i.e., proper irrigation management. The subsidised and mismanaged irrigation distribution systems are resulting in numerous environmental problems. The environmental groups neither try to influence the policy nor mobilise and convince the farmers which is vital in this particular issue. For, this may result in antagonising the farm lobby as a whole. There may not be any popular (grassroots level) support for such a movement. For, these problems are of long run nature and do not affect the immediate survival of the local people. Moreover, the impact is realised gradually over a period and, hence, may not have mass appeal. Therefore, the present trend indicates that

environmental movements are linked to immediate livelihood and human rights issues which can arouse popular support rather than environmental concerns as such. This, in turn, may help in winning the confidence of the people and gradually make them aware of long term linkages between environmental protection and development.

Perhaps this may be the reason why environmental concerns receive least priority even at the policy level. For instance, in the case of Narmada while the activist groups try to influence the policy in the name of human rights (including livelihood) and environmental problems of the dam, the state tries to counter this with the argument of ameliorating poverty in the down stream areas (beneficiaries of irrigation). In this context, what is missing in the approach is sorting out of the problems at the pre-execution level which is the responsibility of the state as well as the activist groups. This would help in avoiding wastage of public money. At present, there are two major projects, Narmada and Tehri which are stalled half-way due to protests from the environmental groups, without serving any purpose. The main lacuna on the part of the state is that no proper Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was carried out at the initial stage for many of the projects. Even when it is carried out it is never put before the public for discussion which is a prerequisite for any EIA study. On the other hand, the evidence shows that environmental concerns/issues gain prominence only at a later stage of the contemporary social movements in India. This may be to attract wider popularity and support. For, in the absence of environmental awareness at the grassroots level, these issues draw little support from the local people and, hence, the issues have to be articulated in a fashion that attracts spontaneous response from the people. Once people's support is assured, broader issues such as environment can be incorporated into the movement.

Thus, hitherto, environmental movements in India which could exploit the linkage between environmental degradation and immediate livelihoods and human rights issues have become



popular. But, the popularity received by *Narmada Bachao Andolan* can mainly be attributed to the strategies followed to gain external influence, including foreign NGOs and governments. Though *Narmada Andolan* is considered as a partial success this does not reflect a healthy trend as far as Indian environmental movements are concerned, at least on two accounts. First, the interference of outside agencies appears to be more political than ecological as their influence was conspicuously absent in the case of other strident environmental problems like the Bhopal tragedy. Second, unless the pressure for protecting the environment comes from the local people themselves, it is unlikely that they would succeed. For, state's actions are often determined by the demands of the majority rather than their requirements. In the absence of awareness among the people, the state always serves (certain) class interests. Though the major environmental movements in India succeeded in articulating the linkages between environment and livelihood they failed to provide any solutions towards ameliorating the problems either through policy changes or through suggesting feasible alternatives. For, despite their popularity, none of the movements could bring in change in the attitudes of the policy makers towards incorporating environmental issues into development projects. Large projects continue to dominate the public investment scenario in agriculture. The alternative development paradigms (to large projects) suggested by environmental groups are not appealing in terms of meeting the large scale requirements such as water, power, etc. However, some of the organisations or individuals at the micro level are demonstrating these linkages and showing exemplary results. What follows is the discussion on two such case studies.

#### IV. THE MICRO LEVEL MOVEMENTS

Here we discuss two of the most successful movements at the micro level which integrated the environmental as well as development aspects. These are: (i) Ralegan Siddhi experiment (named after the village); and (ii) *Pani-Panchayat* (water council), which are located in Maharashtra State and not far from each other. The success of these case studies are very well documented [see

for details, Pagare and Pagare, 1994; Deshpande and Reddy, 1990]. Therefore, instead of going into details of their achievements (ecological and economic), we would try to focus on how these movements are organised and disseminated. For, these two cases portray different approaches for achieving the same goal of sustainable development. Moreover, generating awareness among the villagers is central in both the cases.

In the case of Ralegan Siddhi, Anna Hazare (the man behind the success) followed a philosophical path shown by Gandhi and Vivekananda, where he used religion and cultural factors to bring the desired change in a degenerated society. Through various religious and cultural activities he brought the faction-ridden village together, which is essential for the success of any programme. After winning the confidence of the people, he put forward four principles without which sustainable development and removal of poverty would not have been possible in the village. These include four activities, namely: sterilization, prohibition, ban on grazing and ban on tree-felling. As a result, liquor was totally banned from the village, large scale afforestation programme was started by planting trees in the catchment areas of various watersheds, grasslands were conserved through social fencing thus preventing cattle, goats and sheep from entering certain portions of grazing lands. As the availability of grass has increased, farmers were encouraged to stall-feed their cattle, thus increasing the milk yield. This was followed by watershed development programmes which have enhanced agricultural yields in a more sustainable fashion [Pagare and Pagare, 1994]. This whole process of transformation of village from poverty ridden to self sufficient status was not a smooth sail. There was lot of opposition in the initial stages, but people were persuaded and encouraged to adhere to the four principles. The sustenance of these principles for the past eight years is due to people's increased awareness and realisation. This is striking, especially in the case of total prohibition in the village which is a rare phenomenon in a divergent society.



The approach of *Pani-Panchayat* (Water Council) is somewhat different from that of Ralegan Siddhi. Vilasrao Salunke (the force behind *Pani-Panchayat*) tried to convince the villagers by explaining to them the importance of soil conservation and water harvesting mechanisms in a drought prone region. As he failed to convince the poverty stricken villagers (who used to migrate in search of work), he himself took the responsibility of demonstrating the impact of watershed development programme, which is critical for sustainable development in the drought prone regions. He leased in some 40 acres of land and started cultivating through watershed management approach. It took three years for the villagers to realise the benefits of the environment friendly cultivation practices. Then onwards the demonstration effect on demand for water has taken over and, within another three years, there was a metamorphosis of the village. Out-migration was stopped completely and yield rates and income levels improved substantially due to the increased water tables and *in situ* moisture levels which made lift irrigation possible in this drought prone region. In about ten years the number of lift irrigation schemes has gone up to more than 100 and most of them are functioning in a sustainable fashion. The reason behind the success of these schemes and their sustainability is the unity among the villagers and strict adherence to the rules and regulations laid down by the *Pani-Panchayat* which is an unanimously elected body among the villagers [for details see Deshpande and Reddy, 1990]. Some of the important rules include: (i) water rights being attached to households or individuals rather than to land; (ii) restricting cropping pattern to low water-intensive crops; (iii) equal distribution of water on the basis of household size and distribution of water to landless labour who can sell water or sharecrop; and (iv) contribution by the households for the schemes in the initial stage, i.e., 25 per cent and the rest is taken on loan which is also paid off by the farmers in instalments.

The above two cases are among the most successful in the context of environment and sustainable development which is made possible through bringing awareness among the people.

The interesting part is that two different paths are followed in these cases. While socio-cultural aspects were found useful in Ralegan, demonstration of economic gains proved successful in the case of *Pani-Panchayat*. This is not to say that these factors were best suited to the socio-economic conditions in these villages. It may be due to the approaches followed by the individual leaders who have their own perspectives. Nevertheless, the end result is the same in both the cases, though the spread of *Pani-Panchayat* is much faster than that of Ralegan.

However, the success of these two cases is also attributed to other factors like socio-economic homogeneity of the villages, especially the economic. Almost all the villagers were struggling for their survival before the schemes and they knew very well that the benefits could be sustained only if they work united. But, as the *Pani-Panchayat* schemes spread it is becoming increasingly difficult to control the individual farmers to restrict to the suggested cropping pattern as they prefer to grow high value water-intensive crops like sugar cane [Reddy, 1995]. This, in turn, is affecting the sustainability of the schemes both in terms of availability and distribution of water. Moreover, the success of these cases are highly dependent on the committed leadership which is hard to find in the present context of socio-political development in the country. Unity and participation of rural people is crucial for the success of sustainable development. However, to the contrary, in most of the villages community management of natural systems like common grazing lands and other natural resources is disappearing fast because decentralised democratic system and the resulting party politics have made serious dents in the village unity [for a detailed discussion on the decline of traditional water systems, see Reddy, et al., 1997]. The end result is institutional failure as well as policy failure. This is proving detrimental to the spreading and replication of schemes like Ralegan and *Pani-Panchayat* where village unity is crucial. But, these two cases give a clear message that bringing awareness among the people concerned is vital for protecting the



environment. Moreover, environmental protection should lead to economic gains and their proper distribution should be ensured. These aspects need to be addressed effectively at the macro level for bringing in the desired policy changes which should be the prime motive of the environmental movements in India. The maturity of environmental movements is determined by the issues they address through awareness building rather than their popularity with media and international agencies. Awareness building is crucial in countries like India where more than half of the population does not receive basic literacy, let alone environmental education. However, our intention is not to belittle the importance of popular movements. In fact, these movements have helped in bringing awareness, whatever little, regarding the irreversible environmental damages (such as loss of forest cover, culture, etc.), that could be bequeathed to the society due to the present development process.

#### V. SOME REFLECTIONS

Awareness and concern for environment have remained, more or less, restricted to a few individuals in most of the developing countries like India. As a result, despite the rise in the number of conflicts and movements over environmental issues, concern for the environment has remained peripheral for most of the contemporary movements. Though it is obvious that environmental issues get snowed under developmental issues at the grassroots and policy levels, the contemporary movements also seem to fail in addressing ecological aspects.

This paper on the backdrop of contemporary popular movements in India, argues that the present trend is not healthy as the movements fail to integrate environment and development. In other words, they are basically ecocentric rather than pragmatic. Even the *Chipko* movement, hitherto the most popular movement in terms of local people's (including women) involvement, has failed to carry forward its objective of developing the region and ameliorating the conditions of the local people in the later years. The recent movements, such as Narmada, are more effective in bringing the conflicts between

development and environment to the fore rather than working towards sustainable development (ecological as well as economic). The ecocentric approach (borrowed from Western movements) may not suit developing countries as the main concern here continues to be the basic needs. And, hence, the approach of these movements in India ought to be different from that in the developed countries. Moreover, the environmental groups and the state need not always work at cross purposes, they can also work in tandem in addressing some of the pressing problems.

In the absence of basic literacy, let alone environmental education, to more than 50 per cent of the population, the grassroots level awareness and concern for environment are rather low on the priority list. As a consequence, environmental concerns, in the absence of any direct linkage with livelihood, are not germane to the local needs. In fact, they are imposed from above. Often the struggles of local people over the control of resources are labelled as ecological conflicts by the environmentalists and the issues of environment become central to the movement at a later stage with the involvement of sympathetic outside forces. The articulation of environmental issues, however, helps in getting external support rather than local support. Perhaps, due to this reason environmental issues are conspicuous in the contemporary social movements in India. This in turn has led to their wider popularity and success in some cases, though to a limited extent. On the other hand, the link between immediate livelihood and environmental degradation seems to be most effective in getting local people's as well as external support. Getting people's support on pure ecological grounds is rather difficult at the present level of socio-economic development in India. For, the ecological impact of dam on downstream areas (beneficiaries) is equally important, but the anti-dam movements (on environmental grounds) never try to get the support of the beneficiary population by explaining the long run linkages of environment and development. In the down stream areas the livelihood is not adversely affected in the short run. On the contrary, economic conditions are expected to improve, in which case it amounts to



antagonising the local people in these areas. Therefore, the focus on environmental concerns is limited to specific issues rather than taking a holistic view. It is also ironical that only specific issues attract international attention to the neglect of more strident environmental problems. At the moment, it is rather intriguing whether the environmental issues are really at the heart of contemporary movements in India, though most of them are labelled as environmental movements. In this context, it may be interesting to look into the political economy of environmental protection at the international level and its influence on the local environmental movements.

On the other hand, while the popular environmental movements at the macro level appear to be lacking in direction, the achievements of micro level movements in addressing the issues of sustainable development seem to be more tangible. The major difference between these two is that while the former focus on influencing the policy, the latter influence the concerned people through building up awareness and result (development) oriented efforts. In the absence of environmental awareness among people, influencing the policy may prove difficult as the policy making is often influenced by the majority's demands or class interests. Clearly, environment is not on the priority list of the majority populace and certainly not as far as class interests are concerned. Therefore, the efforts of the environmental groups at the policy level may be directed towards bringing in awareness and changing attitudes of the people towards environment which need some hard policy decisions. This, in turn, would help in building environmental movements in a holistic and sustainable fashion.

## NOTES

1. Another success was with regard to Bedthi project in the Uttar Kannada district of Karnataka State. This project was abandoned due to the opposition from prosperous and influential spice garden farmers whose lands were to be submerged. These farmers used their influence and resorted to hectic lobbying tactics with political leaders forcing the government to abort the project [Gadgil and Guha, 1994]. However, this instance is not widely known.

2. The Bhopal gas tragedy took place at night on December

2-3, 1984. About 30-40 tonnes of methyl isocyanate leaked from the storage tank of Union Carbide factory, a multinational company manufacturing pesticides, located at Bhopal, the industrial capital of Madhya Pradesh - a central Indian State. This gas is described as creeping, deadly, yellow, choking vapour which was intensely irritating to the eyes and lungs. It has claimed 2,500 lives within three days of the incident [Das, 1995].

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