

Environment Reporting in India: In Search of a Defining Philosophy

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Abstract

There is a kind of ideals and values of environmental journalism that every newsroom should commit to report; the values that exists independently of its value to humans. This must be a revelatory experience for anyone interested in the environment or in corporate regulation, and there must be an invaluable urge for environmental journalists to penetrate behind the veils of secrecy and obfuscation that surround so many environmental stories. While giving a closer look into the different types of environmental movements in India and many a shades in the movement for environment in terms of its ideological and political orientation, the researcher points out that newspapers content do not appear to have anything to do with the different shades of philosophy that guide environmental movements around the world. This apathy of treating environment as a phenomenon with a serious interpretation for national polity, to translate the debate of using the country as a dumping ground by the west, to link the issue of fishing trawlers in the deep sea with the question of sea-resource depletion or food security are some of factors that speak of a greater malady associated with Indian environmental journalism

Introduction

During the 1970s, philosophers joined the debate of stopping the erosion of common resources known otherwise as common property resources and a new branch of ethics was born, environmental philosophy. Up till now, barring the scribbling of a few maverick writers, the most circulated notion was that we were concerned about caring for the Earth for self-interested purposes. What's bad for the earth was bad for us too. But by 1970, some philosophers were calling for other values in nature to be recognized. Yes, they said, a healthy planet is good for humans, but wildlife has its own value too – a value that exists independently of its value to humans. This ethical conundrum surfaces with almost every environmental decision that we face. Do we protect nature for our sake or for its sake?

Agenda based reporting or advocacy reporting has a short history, not more than 50 years old, in India. Environmental reporting started hitting headlines in India with the beginning of Chipko movement and some years later, Save Narmada (Narmada Bachao) Movement. Even twenty years down the line, Indian media have kept on reporting on environment only on public demand, based on local issues. It has been argued by Downs(1972)in the context of environmental reporting that there is a spasmodic occurrences of interest. Stories fade in and fade out as the interest in the crisis wanes. While it has been the case across the globe, reporting of environment in developed societies involves a larger spectrum as it has been able to integrate different shades of western environmental philosophy. While western environmental philosophical thoughts like Deep Ecology, Radical Ecology or Eco-Feminism have been able to make their way into the mediated discourse on environment, there has been a conspicuous absence of any knowledge about the

tenets of Indian environmentalism in media discourse of our country.

Guha and Gadgil(1995) maintained that destruction of environment in the western world has had primarily an adverse impact on health and natural habitats valued primarily for science, leisure and aesthetics. But in the Third World, the destruction has threatened the chances of survival of millions of rural people. This explains why western environmental movements has hardly ever challenged socio economic basis and ran parallel to the consumer society, whereas the environmental conflict in the third world, because of its close links to the questions of subsistence and survival, has fiercely criticized the agenda of development promoted by both government and private parties bringing into sharp focus the fact that there is a clear distinction between the environmental agenda of 'the rich' and 'the poor'.

Indian Environmentalism

Broadly speaking Indian environmental movement can be divided into three categories. It has material, political and ideological contexts. The material context has been provided by the ongoing struggle over natural resources which have got in oppositions the social groups who have largely profited from the indiscriminate use of land, water and other earth resources, and group of people, like fishermen, landless poor, pastoral nomads, small peasants whose livelihood depend on the logical use of these resources. Indian experiences show that the problem lies at the root of developmental process initiated in India itself. While natural resources like water and forests were being used to produce energy and commodities (Gadgil and Guha,1995) for the well to do, the poorer section was left to bear the economic, social and environmental cost of economic development whether in the form of the declining availability of resources of physical displacement, (ibid).

The political contexts of Indian environmental movement have tried to act against these material problems. Their modus operandi has comprised three distinct yet interconnected set of initiatives.

Firstly, they tried to stop ecologically destructive practices by organizing socially and materially deprived groups. Secondly, they tried to develop public consciousness through media and especially by organizing working groups and eco- development camps and thirdly they have tried to go for ecological rehabilitation by planting trees, rain water conservation and soil conservation to restore degraded village ecosystems and thereby enhancing availability of life indicators of the deprived villagers.

Ideologically speaking, Indian environmental movement is a multicoloured umbrella, with three distinct different ideological shades governing environmental movements in India since independence.

First among them are the Gandhians who have made it a point to view ecological degradation and social conflicts as primarily a moral problem (ibid). These crusading Gandhians believe that uniqueness of Indian value system lies in its ability to wear a badge of indifference in the face of economic and material opportunities. Therefore they talk about returning to a pre material and pre colonial village life style where humans would be again in the lap of nature, where money would be the least important denomination of human exchange and nature would be given back its predominant position. They talk about Gandhi's "Ramrajya" (ibid) and taking it literally instead of metaphorically, try to inspire people by rejecting material world view as it encourages wasteful life styles. In this regard, crusading Gandhians frequently cite Hindu scriptures as exemplifying a traditional reverence for nature and life forms.

The crusading Gandhians propagate a traditional and non-modern ways of life and are scathing in their attack on Indian intelligentsia who they found to be in the grip of rational thought and economic growth syndrome. They believe environmental degradation is a direct outcome of the fact that we are going away from nature and only a complete rejection of consumerist life style can save us from wasteful exploitation of natural resources.

On the other end of ideological spectrum stand the ecological Marxists. They believe, it is the unjust economic process and denials of equal access to resources that are largely at the root of exploitation of natural resources. The rich exploit the common property resources for their profit while poor do so to survive. For them the problem is more at political and economic levels rather than question of values and therefore the creation of 'economically just' society is a logical precondition of social and ecological harmony. When ecological Marxists put their ideological orientation into practice, they organised poor for collective action in an effort to restore the pattern of equal distribution of wealth, including ecological one, while including various Naxalite and radical Christian groupings. Ecological Marxists in the Indian context are perhaps most closely identified with People's Science Movements (PSMs)- the best known of which is the KSSP- whose initial concern with taking science to the people has been widened to include environmental protection. Ram Chandra Guha(1995) feels that Ecological Marxists can be distinguished from Gandhians in two significant respects, their unremitting hostility to tradition (and corresponding faith in modernity and modern science) and in their relatively greater emphasis on confrontational movements.

Between these two extreme shreds of polarity, one can find the Appropriate Technology Group (ibid). This is the set of environmentalists who are though ideologically closer to crusading Gandhians, and are in favour of using appropriate technology to

sustain both development and environment. 'Less strident than the crusading Gandhians in its opposition to industrial society, this strand of environmental movement strives for a working synthesis of agriculture and industry, big and small units, and western and eastern technological traditions. In its political emphasis on constructive work, it is closer to Gandhians tradition and has done pioneering work on generation & diffusion of resource conserving, labour intensive and socially liberating technologies while in its ambivalent attitude towards religion and criticism of traditional social hierarchies it is quite close to western socialism'.

These three set of ideologies of environmentalism have at one point or the other been used in certain movements and they are not used as stationary and inherently contradictory concepts by the ideologues. But the followers of these three distinctly different perspectives have used different patterns of putting their ideas into practice. While Appropriate Technologists have prepared to work on a micro scale –a group of contiguous villages at best- to demonstrate the viability of an alternative model of economic development, Gandhians have a tendency to think globally and act globally. The Marxists groups have tended to keep the activities limited to a intermediate range, may be a district or sometimes a state.

The ideological differences between these three groups have influenced their areas of activism too. While Gandhians' dislike of industry and urban centres have forced them to opt for rural society, Appropriate Technologists, while accepting that some degree of industrialization was inevitable in reality, tried to find some technologies appropriate for the village folk. It is only the Ecological Marxists who have tried to focus on the industries and talked about industrial pollution and safety of the worker.

While these three ideologies have more or less dominated the scene, there are two more important functional ideologies operating in tandem so far as eco-activism in India is concerned. Foremost among them is the strand called Wilderness Protection which steadfastly has been talking about the erosion of not only wild lands, but also wild animals, especially Big Cats. Earlier they were thoroughly pre-occupied with Big Cats, but now over the years they have started talking about 'species equality' in pursuit of more extensive systems of parks and sanctuaries and a total ban on human activity in protected area.

The next and final strand in environment movement is Scientific Conservation, a la, land and water degradation. Though neither wilderness protection nor scientific conservation have been popular movements, both have been influential in persuading the Government to go for Wildlife Protection Act 1972 (modified in 1991), the Forest Conservation Act of 1980 and Environment Protection Act 1986. Since they have less to do with radical approaches in relation with basic subsistence methods, they have been labeled as elitists. But their contribution to protection of environment in India cannot be overlooked.

Media Projections

When we see a moving visual, we tend to forget that what we see as a macro expression is essentially a collection of many frames, or the micro picture. In the similar vein, journalism as a silent chronicler of history carries in the pages of a newspaper a host of micro pictures which, when connected, reveals traits of a bigger picture, bit by bit. This investigation into the trends of environmental reporting in major newspapers of India has tried to take a look into the emerging and existing pattern of coverage of one of the biggest concern of humans, i.e. environment, around the world and is also an attempt to deconstruct the larger picture by connecting threads, both within the realm of environmental reporting and in terms of pattern of

journalism existing in the country at the moment, outside of that immediate realm of environmental reporting.

There are some other important areas relating to ideological spectrum of environment movement which have never been brought into focus by these newspapers, either through hard news items or features in recent times. Though there have been many a shade in the movement for environment in terms of its ideological and political orientation, the newspaper content do not appear to have anything to do with the different shades of philosophy that guide environmental movements worldwide.

There has been an understanding that newspapers in India are quite alive to the problems of environment and that they give quite considerable space to the issue in an effort to address the issue with due diligence. In fact, everywhere in the world, the movement to save environment has always been amply aided by media. Every time there is a movement on some environmental issues, the activists have quite openly asked for help from media. The same has happened in India also in eighties and nineties during Narmada Bachao Andolan.

But this was a different decade, a decade of living in a globalised world for the Indian media. And any expectation about the active and serious engagement of Indian media with the cause of environment has been shattered at the end of the study.

The news items as we observed, merely report on what is happening around the world in general and India in particular. Any attempt to monitor or to ascertain the underlying philosophical threads that guide all these news items through was found to be a futile attempt. The currents and cross currents of environmental ideology have failed to make any significant entry into the news items of the major newspapers in India. There are some traces of wildlife conservation

guided by Deep Ecology philosophy but these are only sporadic arguments about the rights of animals over the forests or the need to curve population around the place. So far as the tenets of Indian Environmentalism are concerned, the ideas propagated by Appropriate Technology school has got some oblique reference in the news items because English newspapers in India appeared to have a combined philosophy of supporting development and yet sensitive enough to advocate the use of proper technology to be in sync with the time. This abject failure to grant space to different dimensions of environmental philosophy has happened principally due to the inability of these newspapers to recognize different shades for want of 'domain knowledge'(Jay Mazoomdar,2006). This aversion for developing a knowledge base is also one of the reasons of following the policy of printing news on environment on *as it come* basis.

Environmental issues are largely political in nature and are stories with a deep ideological overtone in the most developed nations. They are sometimes treated as *life style* issues. But at the same time, concerted effort by media and environmental activists have forced every governmental agency to take into consideration the environmental cost factor before any developmental project is undertaken. Every time, a developmental issue is mooted, environmental dimension becomes part of the discourse and when it comes to Indian newspapers, especially the agenda setting newspapers, environmental news is played up in the front page mostly when it is discussed in the context of international politics and refers to the comments of world leaders made in some forums.

This apathy of treating environment as a phenomenon with a serious interpretation for national polity, to translate the debate of using the country as a dumping ground by the west, to link the issue of fishing trawlers in the deep sea with the question of sea-resource

depletion or food security are some of factors that speak of a greater malady associated with Indian environmental journalism.

The first decade of 21st century has been a witness to many changes regarding the way of looking at environment in India. This is the decade when environmental laws in the country have been made stricter, aborigines have been given right over the jungle lands that they have lived on so far and enough noise has been made over the vanishing act of big cats as well as forest land. And surely, for an average media watcher, media has been found to have played a proactive role in terms of environment. But the fact is that there are certain issues about which media have always maintained a proactive stance and wild life conservation has been one of those issues in India. Long back, the Maharaja of the princely state of Junagadh in nineteenth century was famous for tiger hunting. Later on he was forced to stop that and in fact became one of the proponents of tiger conservation after being criticised in pages of newspapers. And now Junagadh forest is now one the most thickly populated tiger reserves in the country. Then what are the differences now and then in view of the fact that whole state of affair of media has undergone a metaphorical change and environment or wild life has become one of the most talked about issues?

Trumbo (1994) focused on Inter media agenda setting relating to news coverage of any issue. In Indian context, it becomes relevant as has happened with tiger poaching and conservation issue where both print medium and electronic medium, respectively *The Indian Express* and *NDTV* have taken the drum beating to a higher note and it harks back to the philosophy of wildlife conservation philosophy mentioned by Guha and Gadgil(1994). But the inherent problem in this kind of reporting for wildlife conservation happens to be the easiest for the image happy media (Boorstin, 1992) to align with.

Vandana Shiva(1994) attacks the success of globalization of western models of development and advanced capitalism in colonialism and patriarchy. For her, development was thus reduced to a continuation of the process of colonization; it became an extension of the project of wealth creation in modern western patriarchy's economic vision, which was based on the exploitation or exclusion of women (of the west and the non-west), on the exploitation and deregulation of nature, and on the exploitation and erosion of other cultures. Across the globe, there is now a serious discussion about the impact of environmental degradation on women. Women in poor households constitute a significant contributor to maintenance and drawing resources from common property resources. Women and children have been found to be the worst victims of environmental degradation in terms of health and maintenance of family life. The impact of even green house gases on the mortality of children or on the bearing ability of women as well as shortening of their life span because of being forced to travel miles to bring water are some of the facts best overlooked by Indian newspapers.

There has been another knowledge gap in the reporting of environment in the newspapers under discussion and it is their inability to accept the existence of *new politics*. The politics of environment calls for a participative action at the decision making level. It talks globally about a new brand of decision making process which involves a sympathetic consideration of the views of non-urban, impoverished non-elite majority who would be worst affected by so called development projects because they are the stake holders in displacement. The empathetic action on the part of the newspapers to understand the dilemmas of development, or mindless transformation of wild lands into national park, displacing and depriving aborigines of their rightful share of the eco-produce is the call of the day in terms of interpretative journalism. Apart from that, the newspapers also fail in their responsibility to serve as

chronicler of time because an elitist approach to history has now been rejected in favour of a more inclusive history taking within its ambit the voices of the *oppressed*. The approach of these news items is thoroughly elitist from the viewpoints of a social historian, an exclusive history which records the process of destruction without any reference to the *destroyed*.

Another serious flaw involved in the process is that the brand of environmental reporting has been thoroughly city based, except in a few cases. There was a time when newsmen had reached out to the people fighting in remote villages of Gujarat or Madhya Pradesh to spread the messages of Narmada Bachao Andolan, but it has now become a rarest of rare phenomenon. This near absolute rejection of rural landscape has also made it imperative for the newspapers to depend on agency reports when it comes to relate consumption pattern to climate change. The dynamics of hunger and displacement as consequent fallout of depletion of common property resources (CPR) and development projects is nearly absent in the newspapers under discussion.

On the whole, these newspapers fail to understand that environment is an interconnected web. A disruption in the eco-system of Himalayas may effect a serious lapse in the food chain of south of Godavari basin, or a reduction in under water level in Punjab is perhaps an indication of the country going dry. There are reports on almost every aspects of environmental crisis, but the attempt to convert these stories into a representative picture of the crisis that looms large ahead of us is terribly underrepresented in the agenda setting newspapers of the time and that leaves enough room for speculation about the maladies affecting environmental journalism in the country .

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