

## **ECOLOGY, RESISTANCE, AND THE POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT: ENVIRONMENTAL AND ANTI-DISPLACEMENT MOVEMENTS IN MODERN INDIA**

**Dr. Kuntala Soy**

*Head Department of History, Talcher Autonomous College, Talcher*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This article examines five landmark environmental and anti-displacement movements in India; the Bishnoi movement, the Chipko and Appiko campaigns, the Silent Valley struggle, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and the Niyamgiri anti-mining resistance, as constitutive episodes in the formation of India's ecological politics. Drawing on scholarship spanning environmental history, political ecology, legal studies, and Indigenous rights theory, the article argues that these movements share a common analytical grammar: they challenged the state's authority to define developmental necessity, asserted the inseparability of ecological and cultural survival, and inaugurated new mechanisms of participatory environmental governance. Rather than treating each movement as a discrete case study, this analysis situates them within a broader genealogy of subaltern ecological thought, tracing how communities historically excluded from planning processes transformed local grievances into nationally significant precedents. The article further contends that the juridical achievements of these movements, culminating in the Niyamgiri Gram Sabha verdict of 2013, must be read alongside their structural limitations, including the persistence of displacement, the asymmetric recognition of women's leadership, and the unresolved tension between environmental protection and social development in marginalized regions. Ultimately, these struggles illuminate the contested terrain of development in postcolonial India and compel a rethinking of the criteria by which progress itself is measured.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Environmental Movements, Displacement, Political Ecology, Indigenous Rights, Chipko, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Niyamgiri, Forest Rights Act, Postcolonial Development.*

---

### **Article History**

**Received: 10 Dec 2020 | Revised: 14 Dec 2020 | Accepted: 21 Dec 2020**

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

The relationship between large-scale developmental infrastructure and ecological degradation has been one of the defining axes of postcolonial Indian politics. Since Independence, the pursuit of industrialisation and economic growth has systematically intersected with the dispossession of agrarian, adivasi, and forest-dependent communities. Dam reservoirs have submerged villages; mining concessions have fragmented tribal territories; commercial forestry has displaced communities whose subsistence was inseparable from the forest itself. This trajectory was not without contestation. From the Rajasthan desert in 1730 to the mining corridors of Odisha in the twenty-first century, communities confronted with dispossession have organised, mobilised, and, on occasion, prevailed.

The environmental and anti-displacement movements examined in this article constitute a distinctive and internally coherent tradition of subaltern ecological politics in India. They are not reducible to a single ideological programme; nor do they represent a linear narrative of progress from protest to policy. Rather, they are episodic yet interconnected expressions of a shared conviction: that forests, rivers, hills, and sacred landscapes are not commodities to be liquidated in the service of national growth but foundations of life, identity, and community. This conviction, articulated in the slogans, practices, and legal arguments of these movements, amounts to what Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier have called a politics of livelihood; a form of environmentalism rooted not in leisure-class aesthetics but in the material conditions of survival.

Existing scholarship has examined these movements primarily as discrete case studies, each evaluated on the terms of its immediate outcomes. This article proposes a different analytical frame. By reading the Bishnoi tradition, the Chipko and Appiko movements, the Silent Valley campaign, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and the Niyamgiri resistance as a genealogically connected series, it becomes possible to trace the cumulative transformation of India's environmental governance: from a regime in which ecological sacrifice was regarded as an acceptable cost of development, toward one in which community consent, environmental impact assessment, and Indigenous rights have acquired juridical standing. The article proceeds through four sections: a historical account of each movement's emergence and trajectory; an analysis of the legal and institutional transformations they precipitated; a critical assessment of their structural limitations; and a concluding reflection on their collective significance for the theory and practice of democratic development.

### **THE BISHNOI TRADITION OF ECOLOGICAL RESISTANCE**

Any serious account of organised environmental resistance in India must begin with the Bishnoi community of Rajasthan, whose ecological praxis predates the contemporary environmentalist movement by several centuries. Founded in the fifteenth century by Guru Jambheshwar, known to his followers as Jambhoji, the Bishnoi tradition codified twenty-nine principles governing social and spiritual conduct, many of which prescribed the protection of trees, wildlife, and natural habitats as religious obligations rather than instrumental policies.<sup>1</sup> In the arid ecology of western Rajasthan, where the khejri tree (*Prosopis cineraria*) provided fodder, shade, nitrogen fixation, and soil stabilisation, this ethical framework was simultaneously a theology and a survival strategy. The blackbuck and other wildlife were woven into both ecological equilibrium and ritual life, such that harming them constituted a violation not merely of custom but of the moral order.

The defining episode of this tradition occurred in 1730, when the Marwar state dispatched soldiers to the village of Khejarli to procure timber for palace construction. What followed was, by historical standards, extraordinary: Amrita Devi, a Bishnoi woman, physically embraced the marked trees and, according to oral tradition, declared that to lose one's life in the defense of a tree was no sacrifice at all.<sup>2</sup> She was killed. Her daughters followed. Over the course of the confrontation, three hundred and sixty-three Bishnoi men and women sacrificed their lives resisting the felling. The ruler of Marwar subsequently halted the operation and granted formal protection to Bishnoi villages—arguably the first state-sanctioned environmental protection measure in Indian history.

The scholarly significance of the Khejarli episode extends beyond its symbolic resonance. It establishes that the logic of community-based environmental resistance in India is not an import of Western conservationism but has deep indigenous roots in biocultural cosmologies. Alexis Reichert's analysis demonstrates how Bishnoi practices instantiate a

---

<sup>1</sup>AchyutAryal, "Bishnoi Communication Theory and Model by Guru Jambheshwara Bhagawaan," in *An Independent Research for Communication Theory Conference 2013* (2013).

relational ontology in which human and non-human life are embedded within shared moral and spiritual obligations.<sup>2</sup> This framework anticipates, by several centuries, what contemporary environmental ethics theorises as the intrinsic value of non-human nature. The Bishnoi case further illustrates that ecological resistance need not be framed in the language of scientific ecology to be analytically rigorous; it may be grounded in theological conviction and still generate durable institutional outcomes.

## CHIPKO AND APPIKO FOREST RESISTANCE

The Chipko movement of the 1970s represents the most widely studied instance of community-based environmental activism in Indian history, and its emergence was inseparable from the structural inequalities of post-Independence forest policy. Commercial logging concessions in the Garhwal Himalayas had, by the late 1960s, systematically privileged external contractors over local communities whose subsistence, in terms of fuelwood, fodder, water regulation, and soil retention, depended upon intact forest cover. The Alaknanda floods of 1970 intensified local awareness of the link between upstream deforestation and downstream disaster.<sup>3</sup> This awareness crystallised in a simple but ecologically accurate formulation: the forest yields not timber, but soil, water, and air—*kyahai jungle keupakar? Mitti, paani aur bayar*.

The pivotal event occurred in 1973 at Reni, in Chamoli district, where Gaura Devi led village women to physically interpose themselves between the contractors' axes and the ash trees marked for felling.<sup>4</sup> The Chipko method of tree-hugging was simultaneously a tactical choice and a symbolic declaration: the forest is our *maika*, our natal home, and its destruction is an assault on our identity and survival. Rekha Pande's analysis of gender and early environmentalism in India situates the Reni action within a broader pattern in which women, bearing disproportionate burdens of ecological degradation through increased labour for fuelwood and water collection, were both the most directly affected constituency and the most committed organizers.<sup>4</sup>

The intellectual dimension of Chipko was articulated most systematically by Sunderlal Bahuguna, whose formulation, ecology is the permanent economy, inverted the dominant developmental calculus by arguing that forests are not resources to be liquidated for short-term revenue but the material infrastructure upon which all economic activity ultimately depends.<sup>5</sup> Bahuguna's *padyatras* (foot marches) and correspondence with political leaders succeeded in framing forest conservation as a question of civilisational choice rather than technical forestry management. After a sustained decade of protest, the Government of India imposed a fifteen-year moratorium on commercial green felling in the Himalayan forests in 1980, a concrete policy outcome attributable directly to the movement's pressure.

The Appiko movement of Karnataka, which emerged in 1983 in the Western Ghats districts of Uttara Kannada, constitutes the southern analogue of Chipko. The Kannada term *appiko*, to embrace, signals its conscious indebtedness to the Himalayan precedent. Manisha Rao's detailed study documents how commercial monoculture plantations had systematically displaced indigenous forest species, disrupting biodiversity and the livelihood systems of communities

<sup>2</sup>Alexis Reichert, "Sacred Trees, Sacred Deer, Sacred Duty to Protect: Exploring Relationships between Humans and Nonhumans in the Bishnoi Community," PhD diss. (Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa, 2015).

<sup>3</sup>B. S. Chauhan, *Environmental Studies* (Firewall Media, 2008).

<sup>4</sup>Rekha Pande, "The Role of Women in the Early Environmental Movement in India," *Narratives of Environmental Challenges in Brazil and India: Losing Nature* (2018): 155.

<sup>5</sup>George Alfred James, *Ecology is Permanent Economy: The Activism and Environmental Philosophy of Sunderlal Bahuguna* (SUNY Press, 2013).

dependent upon diverse non-timber forest produce.<sup>6</sup> The Appiko movement combined tree-hugging protests with systematic educational campaigns, foot marches through forested tracts, and the cultivation of what its activists termed a three-fold agenda: save existing forests, grow new ones, and use forest resources wisely and sustainably (*ulisu, belesu, balasu*). This slogan's emphasis on sustainable use distinguished Appiko from a purely preservationist stance, insisting instead on a model of regenerative co-habitation between communities and forest ecosystems.

### **SILENT VALLEY CONSERVATION MOVEMENT**

The Silent Valley campaign of the late 1970s and early 1980s occupies a distinctive position in Indian environmental history: it is perhaps the first instance in which ecological science, mediated by a mass-membership peoples' science organisation, shaped a major infrastructure decision at the national level. Silent Valley, located in the Palakkad district of Kerala and contiguous with the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, was, and remains, one of the last tracts of undisturbed tropical evergreen rainforest in peninsular India. The proposed hydroelectric project on the Kunthipuzha River, promoted by the Kerala State Electricity Board, would have submerged a substantial portion of this ecosystem. Its most visible casualty would have been the lion-tailed macaque (*Macaca silenus*), an endangered primate endemic to the Western Ghats whose viable population in Silent Valley had attracted international scientific attention.

K. A. Manjusha's analysis of the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad's (KSSP) role in the Silent Valley campaign demonstrates how the organisation functioned as an epistemic intermediary, translating technical ecological findings into accessible public knowledge and thereby constructing a mass constituency for biodiversity conservation in a state where developmental priorities, electrification, irrigation, industrialisation, commanded substantial popular legitimacy.<sup>7</sup> The KSSP conducted public meetings, published pamphlets, and organised student and writer networks around the proposition that primary rainforest, once destroyed, is ecologically irreversible, a form of permanence that no energy infrastructure programme can compensate for. The slogan Save Silent Valley condensed this argument into a call for popular identification with an ecosystem that most Keralites had never visited but came to regard as a form of natural heritage.

The movement's ultimate success was the abandonment of the dam project and the declaration of Silent Valley as a National Park in 1984, established two significant precedents. First, it demonstrated that informed public deliberation, rather than direct confrontation or legal litigation, could constitute a sufficient force to alter state developmental decisions. Second, it validated the principle that biodiversity value is a legitimate criterion in infrastructure planning, a principle that would later be institutionalised in the environmental impact assessment frameworks of the 1990s. Silent Valley thus marks a moment in which the scientific community, civil society organisations, and a mobilised public converged to assert a form of ecological citizenship, the claim that citizens have both the right and the obligation to participate in decisions affecting the natural commons.

### **THE NARMADA BACHAO ANDOLAN AGAINST DISPLACEMENT**

The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) represents the most institutionally complex and internationally resonant episode in India's history of anti-displacement resistance. Organised in opposition to the Sardar Sarovar Dam, the centrepiece of a river valley development scheme encompassing thirty major dams, one hundred and thirty-five medium dams, and

<sup>6</sup>ManishaRao, "In the Margins: Environment, Resources and Livelihoods in the Appiko Chaluvali," *Journal of Social and Economic Development* 14, no. 2 (2012): 155–181.

<sup>7</sup>K. A. Manjusha, "Silent Valley Movement in Kerala: A Study on the Contributions of Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad," *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences* 6, no. 3 (2016): 267–274.

thousands of smaller structures along the Narmada River, the NBA engaged simultaneously in grassroots mobilisation, parliamentary lobbying, judicial litigation, and transnational advocacy over a period spanning more than three decades.<sup>8</sup>

Varsha Bhagat-Ganguly's comprehensive analysis of the Sardar Sarovar case identifies the inadequacy of resettlement planning as both an empirical failure and a structural revelation.<sup>9</sup> The project's proponents had calculated displacement figures that critics argued substantially undercounted affected populations, particularly adivasi communities whose land tenure arrangements did not correspond to formal cadastral records. When Medha Patkar undertook systematic field documentation in the mid-1980s, she found communities that had received neither adequate information about the project's implications nor credible assurances regarding rehabilitation. The NBA's founding logic was therefore not opposition to development per se but opposition to development without accountability, expressed in the movement's defining slogan: *Vikas chahiye, vinashnahin* (We want development, not destruction).<sup>10</sup>

The movement's tactical repertoire drew explicitly from the Gandhian tradition: *padayatra*s (long marches), *dharna* (sit-in protests), hunger strikes, and *jalsamagam* (riverside assemblies). Balakrishnan Rajagopal has theorised the NBA's legal strategy as an instance of counter-hegemonic globalisation, the appropriation of international legal norms and institutional mechanisms by subaltern movements to constrain the developmental state and its financial backers.<sup>11</sup> This strategy found its most significant expression in the movement's engagement with the World Bank, which had committed funding to the Sardar Sarovar project in 1985. Sustained activist pressure and the findings of Susan E. Chaplin's scholarship on World Bank involvement in the Narmada valley prompted the appointment of the independent Morse Commission, whose 1991 report concluded that the project's environmental and rehabilitation conditions had not been met.<sup>12</sup> In 1993, the World Bank withdrew from the project, a withdrawal that Smita Narula characterises as an unprecedented instance of civil society influence over a multilateral development bank.<sup>13</sup>

The subsequent legal history of the NBA before the Supreme Court of India is equally instructive. The Court's 2000 judgment permitted construction to proceed subject to a phased rehabilitation mechanism overseen by Grievance Redressal Authorities established in each affected state.<sup>14</sup> Critics have argued that these authorities functioned inconsistently and that rehabilitation remained incomplete at successive stages of dam heightening. The dam's eventual inauguration in 2017 thus represented a contested resolution: the state insisted that irrigation and drinking water benefits to millions justified the project's social costs; the NBA maintained that incomplete rehabilitation rendered the project's developmental claims fraudulent. M. S. Gill's analysis of resettlement in Maharashtra documents specific cases in which families received inadequate land, infrastructure, or livelihood support following displacement.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Varsha Bhagat-Ganguly, "Dams and Displacement: The Case of the Sardar Sarovar Project, India," in *Research Handbook on Law, Environment and the Global South* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 371.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Krishna Mallick, "Capabilities Approach and Sustainable Environment: The Case of Save the Narmada River Movement in India," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1: 272–292.

<sup>11</sup>Balakrishnan Rajagopal, "The Role of Law in Counter-hegemonic Globalization and Global Legal Pluralism: Lessons from the Narmada Valley Struggle in India," *Leiden Journal of International Law* 18, no. 3 (2005): 345–387.

<sup>12</sup>Susan E. Chaplin, "The Role of the World Bank in India's Narmada Valley Project," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (1996): 105–132.

<sup>13</sup>Smita Narula, "The Story of Narmada Bachao Andolan: Human Rights in the Global Economy and the Struggle Against the World Bank," *Human Rights Advocacy Stories*, eds. Hurwitz, Satterthwaite, and Ford, West, (2009): 08–62.

<sup>14</sup>Bhagat-Ganguly, "Dams and Displacement," 371–395.

<sup>15</sup>Gill, "Resettlement and Rehabilitation in Maharashtra for the Sardar Sarovar Narmada Project," 231–264.

NBA and the Tehri Dam conflict argues that the NBA's enduring significance lies less in the fate of any particular dam than in its transformation of the normative framework within which large infrastructure projects are evaluated. By insisting on informed consent, transparent environmental clearance, and comprehensive prior rehabilitation, the NBA forced a reconceptualisation of the beneficiary population in development planning—one that included, rather than excluded, those whose land, livelihoods, and communities would be sacrificed. This reconceptualisation found partial but genuine institutional expression in the Forest Rights Act of 2006, the Land Acquisition Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act of 2013, and the elaboration of environmental impact assessment norms throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

### **NIYAMGIRI MOVEMENT AND INDIGENOUS RIGHTS**

The Niyamgiri anti-mining movement in Odisha constitutes the most recent and juridically consequential episode in the tradition under examination. The Niyamgiri Hills, spread across Rayagada and Kalahandi districts, encompass approximately two hundred and fifty square kilometres of dense forest in one of India's most mineral-rich states—a state that holds, according to Geetanjoy Sahu's authoritative account, fifty-one percent of India's bauxite reserves, ninety-six percent of its chromite, and ninety-two percent of its nickel deposits.<sup>16</sup> This material abundance has historically co-existed with, and in part produced, the profound socioeconomic marginalisation of the Dongria Kondh and Kutia Kondh communities, both classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups.

Mihir K. Jena and colleagues' ethnographic documentation of the Dongria Kondh establishes that the Niyamgiri Hills are not merely a resource base but a cosmological landscape.<sup>17</sup> The community's spiritual sovereign, Niyam Raja, is understood to reside in these hills; ritual practices, agricultural cycles, and social identity are structured around this relationship. Leah Temper and Joan Martinez-Alier's application of ecological economics to the Niyamgiri case provides a sophisticated framework for understanding how the conflict between net present value calculations and sacred territorial claims cannot be resolved through standard cost-benefit analysis—precisely because the categories of worth employed by the mining conglomerate and the Dongria Kondh are incommensurable.<sup>18</sup> The corporation quantified bauxite deposits; the community spoke of the god of the mountain.

Vedanta Resources' memorandum of understanding with the Odisha government in 1997, and the subsequent award of environmental clearance in 2004 despite documented procedural inadequacies in the public hearing process, placed Niyamgiri within the broader pattern that Samarendra Das and Felix Padel describe as the aluminium cartel's systematic penetration of eastern Indian tribal territories. The formation of the Niyamgiri Suraksha Samiti in 2003 marked the community's transition from dispersed grievance to organised resistance.<sup>19</sup> The movement's framing, as documented by Shelley D. Marshall and Samantha Balaton-Chrimes, combined rights-based argumentation with the affirmation of sacred identity in ways that proved highly effective in mobilising both domestic civil society and international advocacy networks.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Geetanjoy Sahu, "Forest Rights and Tribals in Mineral Rich Areas of India: The Vedanta Case and Beyond," in *Research Handbook on Law, Environment and the Global South* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 272.

<sup>17</sup>Mihir K. Jena, et al., *Forest Tribes of Orissa: The Dongria Kondh* (Vol. 1) (New Delhi: DK Print World, 2002).

<sup>18</sup>Leah Temper and Joan Martinez-Alier, "The God of the Mountain and Godavarman: Net Present Value, Indigenous Territorial Rights and Sacredness in a Bauxite Mining Conflict in India." *Ecological Economics* 96 (2013): 79–87.

<sup>19</sup>Samarendra Das and Felix Padel, *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel* (Orient BlackSwan, 2011).

<sup>20</sup>Shelley D. Marshall and Samantha Balaton-Chrimes, "Tribal Claims against the Vedanta Bauxite Mine in Niyamgiri, India," *Non-Judicial Redress Mechanisms Report Series 9* (2016).

The Supreme Court's 2013 judgment in Orissa Mining Corporation versus Ministry of Environment and Forest directed that twelve Gram Sabhas in the hills' villages must determine whether the proposed mining project infringed upon the religious and cultural rights of the affected communities under the Forest Rights Act of 2006. Felix Padel and Malvika Gupta's analysis characterises this directive as a constitutional recognition that Indigenous peoples' spiritual and cultural rights constitute a form of property that cannot be alienated without free, prior, and informed consent.<sup>21</sup> Between July and August 2013, each of the twelve Gram Sabhas unanimously rejected the mining proposal, an outcome that halted Vedanta's plans and established a jurisprudential precedent of historic significance. For the first time in India, village councils possessed by formal judicial instruction the authority to veto a major industrial project.

The movement's limitations are, however, equally instructive. Virginius Xaxa's critical analysis of the institutional landscape surrounding Niyamgiri notes that the legal victory has not dismantled the structural conditions of Dongria Kondh marginalisation.<sup>22</sup> Healthcare remains inadequate; schools that once served local children have closed; state surveillance in a region overlapping with Maoist conflict zones has intensified. The Rights and Resources Institute's documentation of land conflicts in India contextualises Niyamgiri within a pattern in which approximately sixty percent of mining-related disputes occur in tribal-majority areas, a distribution that reflects not coincidence but the systematic exposure of politically marginalised populations to the social costs of resource extraction.<sup>23</sup> The Niyamgiri case thus demonstrates both the possibility and the limits of legal victories in the absence of affirmative developmental investment in affected communities.

## INSTITUTIONAL LEGACIES AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Read as a cumulative series, the movements examined above exhibit several analytically significant cross-cutting features. First, they demonstrate a consistent trajectory from reactive protest to proactive rights-claiming. The Bishnoi community's resistance was framed in theological terms; Chipko and Appiko articulated a livelihood-based ecological argument; Silent Valley deployed the language of scientific biodiversity conservation; the NBA developed a rights-based framework centred on rehabilitation, consent, and accountability; and Niyamgiri culminated in a constitutionally grounded assertion of Indigenous sovereignty over sacred territory. This progression reflects both the deepening institutionalisation of rights discourse in India and the accumulated strategic learning of successive movements.

Second, each movement, to varying degrees, foregrounded the role of women as both primary constituencies and principal organisers. The Bishnoi women of Khejarli, Gaura Devi's leadership at Reni, and the presence of Medha Patkar at the head of the NBA all attest to a pattern in which women bore the greatest ecological burdens and exercised the most sustained organisational commitment. Yet, as Rekha Pande documents, the institutional recognition of women's leadership within these movements was systematically asymmetric, women organised and sacrificed, while formal organisational roles and public visibility often accrued to male figures.<sup>24</sup> This asymmetry constitutes an unresolved internal contradiction within the tradition of Indian environmental activism.

<sup>21</sup>Felix Padel and Malvika Gupta, "Mining, Development and Environment in India," in *Research Handbook on Law, Environment and the Global South* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 413.

<sup>22</sup>Virginius Xaxa, *How KISS and Indian Anthropology Degrade Tribal People* (The Caravan, 2021).

<sup>23</sup>Rights and Resources Institute, *Land Conflicts in India: An Interim Analysis* (2016).

<sup>24</sup>Pande, "The Role of Women in the Early Environmental Movement in India," 155.

Third, the movements collectively contributed to a transformation of India's environmental governance architecture. The Forest Rights Act of 2006, while imperfect in implementation, represents the partial institutionalisation of demands that the NBA and the Niyamgiri movement had been advancing for decades: the recognition of tribal and forest-dwelling communities as rights-holders rather than encroachers. The elaboration of environmental impact assessment norms, the establishment of the National Green Tribunal, and the juridical recognition of Gram Sabha authority over forest land diversion in tribal areas all reflect, in different degrees, the legislative and judicial processing of civil society pressure that these movements generated.

At the same time, the structural limitations of these achievements demand candid assessment. Policy reforms and legal precedents do not automatically translate into the redistribution of power on the ground. Displacement and ecological degradation have continued at scale throughout the period in which these movements were most active. The NBA's legal struggles did not prevent the Sardar Sarovar Dam's completion; the Niyamgiri verdict has not immunised the region from renewed mining proposals; and the Forest Rights Act's implementation has been notoriously inconsistent across states. Krishna Mallick's capabilities-approach analysis of the NBA suggests that the movement's most enduring contribution may lie not in the specific infrastructure outcomes it influenced but in its expansion of the political imagination, its demonstration that development need not be defined by the preferences of planners and corporations alone, but can be subjected to the demands of communities whose capabilities and freedoms are directly at stake.<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The environmental and anti-displacement movements examined in this article constitute a tradition of political practice and thought that is both historically significant and theoretically generative. From the Bishnoi community's theological ecology to the Dongria Kondh's Gram Sabha verdicts, these movements have consistently advanced a proposition that mainstream development discourse has been slow to accommodate: that ecological sustainability and cultural continuity are not obstacles to development but conditions of its legitimacy. A development model that requires the involuntary sacrifice of forests, rivers, and sacred landscapes by communities who depend upon them for subsistence and identity is, on these movements' terms, not development at all, it is a form of organised dispossession in the name of the general interest.

The analytical implications extend beyond the Indian context. The movements analysed here engage, in practice if not always in theoretical vocabulary, with problems that contemporary political ecology, Indigenous rights scholarship, and environmental justice theory have been attempting to formalise: the inadequacy of cost-benefit analysis as a framework for decisions involving incommensurable values; the structural exposure of politically marginalised populations to the risks of large-scale resource extraction; the necessity of free, prior, and informed consent as a condition of legitimate development; and the potential of community-based governance institutions, Gram Sabhas, panchayats, local ecological knowledge systems, as democratic mechanisms for the management of natural resources.

These movements also illuminate the conditions under which subaltern environmental politics can generate durable institutional change. The Silent Valley campaign's success depended on its ability to constitute an informed public; the NBA's transnational effectiveness derived from its capacity to connect local displacement to international human rights norms; the Niyamgiri movement's juridical victory rested on the convergence of constitutional Indigenous rights provisions, judicial willingness to extend the Forest Rights Act's scope, and a coherent community voice expressed through

---

<sup>25</sup>Mallick, "Capabilities Approach and Sustainable Environment: The Case of Save the Narmada River Movement in India," 272–292.

constitutionally recognised institutions. Each of these conditions is fragile and context-specific; none is automatically reproducible. The tradition's continuity depends on the sustained work of community organisation, intellectual advocacy, and institutional reform.

The question with which this article concludes is, in the end, the question these movements have always posed: who defines development, for whom, and at whose cost? The tradition of ecological resistance examined here does not offer a technical answer to this question. It offers, instead, a political one: that development is legitimate only when those who bear its costs have a genuine voice in its planning, a just share in its benefits, and the constitutional authority to say no when neither condition is met. In a democracy, that is not an obstacle to development—it is its foundation.

## REFERENCES

1. Aryal, Achyut. "Bishnoi Communication Theory and Model by Guru JambheshwaraBhagawaan." In *An Independent Research for Communication Theory Conference 2013*. 2013.
2. Bhagat-Ganguly, Varsha. "Dams and Displacement." pp. 371–395.
3. Bhagat-Ganguly, Varsha. "Dams and Displacement: The Case of the Sardar Sarovar Project, India." In *Research Handbook on Law, Environment and the Global South*, pp. 371–395. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019.
4. Chaplin, Susan E. "The Role of the World Bank in India's Narmada Valley Project." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (1996): 105–132.
5. Chauhan, B. S. *Environmental Studies*. Firewall Media, 2008.
6. Das, Samarendra, and Felix Padel. *Out of This Earth: East India Adivasis and the Aluminium Cartel*. Orient BlackSwan, 2011.
7. Gill, M. S. "Resettlement and Rehabilitation in Maharashtra for the Sardar Sarovar Narmada Project." In *Toward Sustainable Development?*, pp. 231–264. Routledge, 2017.
8. James, George Alfred. *Ecology is Permanent Economy: The Activism and Environmental Philosophy of Sunderlal Bahuguna*. SUNY Press, 2013.
9. Jena, Mihir K., Padmini Pathi, Jagganath Dash, Kamala K. Patnaik, and Klaus Seeland. *Forest Tribes of Orissa: The Dongaria Kondh (Vol. 1)*. New Delhi: DK Print World, 2002.
10. Mallick, Krishna. "Capabilities Approach and Sustainable Environment: The Case of Save the Narmada River Movement in India." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1: 272–292.
11. Manjusha, K. A. "Silent Valley Movement in Kerala: A Study on the Contributions of Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad." *International Journal of Research in Social Sciences* 6, no. 3 (2016): 267–274.
12. Marshall, Shelley D., and Samantha Balaton-Chrimes. "Tribal Claims against the Vedanta Bauxite Mine in Niyamgiri, India." *Non-Judicial Redress Mechanisms Report Series* 9 (2016).
13. Narula, Smita. "The Story of Narmada Bachao Andolan: Human Rights in the Global Economy and the Struggle Against the World Bank." *Human Rights Advocacy Stories*, eds. Hurwitz, Satterthwaite, and Ford. West, 2009: 08–62.

14. Padel, Felix, and Malvika Gupta. "Mining, Development and Environment in India." In *Research Handbook on Law, Environment and the Global South*, pp. 413–434. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019.
15. Pande, Rekha. "The Role of Women in the Early Environmental Movement in India." *Narratives of Environmental Challenges in Brazil and India: Losing Nature* (2018): 155.
16. Rajagopal, Balakrishnan. "The Role of Law in Counter-hegemonic Globalization and Global Legal Pluralism: Lessons from the Narmada Valley Struggle in India." *Leiden Journal of International Law* 18, no. 3 (2005): 345–387.
17. Rao, Manisha. "In the Margins: Environment, Resources and Livelihoods in the AppikoChaluvali." *Journal of Social and Economic Development* 14, no. 2 (2012): 155–181.
18. Reichert, Alexis. "Sacred Trees, Sacred Deer, Sacred Duty to Protect: Exploring Relationships between Humans and Nonhumans in the Bishnoi Community." PhD diss., Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa, 2015.
19. Rights and Resources Institute. *Land Conflicts in India: An Interim Analysis*. 2016.
20. Sahu, Geetanjoy. "Forest Rights and Tribals in Mineral Rich Areas of India: The Vedanta Case and Beyond." In *Research Handbook on Law, Environment and the Global South*, pp. 272–285. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019.
21. Temper, Leah, and Joan Martinez-Alier. "The God of the Mountain and Godavarman: Net Present Value, Indigenous Territorial Rights and Sacredness in a Bauxite Mining Conflict in India." *Ecological Economics* 96 (2013): 79–87.
22. Xaxa, Virginius. *How KISS and Indian Anthropology Degrade Tribal People*. The Caravan, 2021.