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Q8

What role do environmental NGOs and activists play in influencing Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) outcomes for major projects in India? Cite four examples with all important details.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · GS III · 10 marks · Environment and Conservation

Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment.

Core demand of the question

- Explain how environmental NGOs and activists influence EIA outcomes in India
- Cite four real cases with the project, the actors and the outcome
- Keep EIA as a public process, not a private clearance

Revision summary

- **EIA is a public process:** hearing, appraisal, clearance and compliance.

Activists influence it through hearings, RTI, NGT or Supreme Court cases, and Forest Rights gram sabhas.

- **Silent Valley:** KSSP-led campaign stopped a Kerala hydel dam; the valley became a national park.

Narmada Bachao Andolan put displacement at the centre of Sardar Sarovar; the World Bank left; the Court allowed height with rehabilitation conditions.

Vedanta's Niyamgiri mine was refused by Dongria Kondh gram sabhas after the 2013 Supreme Court order.

Sterlite Tuticorin was shut by Tamil Nadu after the 2018 protests and firing over expansion and pollution.

Introduction

- **An Environmental Impact Assessment is supposed to be a public argument:** what a dam, a mine, a smelter or a steel plant will do to forest, river and people, and whether that cost is acceptable. **NGOs and activists** enter that argument with **hearings, petitions, science notes and street pressure**. They cannot stamp a clearance. They can **delay, condition, reroute or kill** a project when the record is weak or the community is unwilling.

Body

How the influence works

Under the **EIA notification**, a major project needs **scoping, a public hearing, an appraisal and a clearance**, with later **compliance**. Activists use the **hearing** to put local knowledge on the minutes. They use the **Right to Information** and leaked draft EIAs to show copy-paste biology. They move the **National Green Tribunal** and the Supreme Court when a hearing was a farce or a sacred grove was listed as wasteland. They organise **gram sabhas** where the

Forest Rights Act requires consent. The influence is therefore **procedural and political**: a better EIA, a set of conditions, a refusal, or a project that dies because finance will not wait. Capture is the other side: a weak NGO can also be sued into silence, and a loud campaign can over-claim. The four cases below are ones where the public record is clear.

- **Peg:** Public hearing minutes and FRA gram sabhas are the lawful hooks; courts are the backstop when those hooks are skipped.
- **Peg:** Media and science collectives (as in **Silent Valley**) can change a Union Cabinet's mind before a modern EIA code even existed.

Four cases

Silent Valley, Kerala. A State hydel project in a rainforest valley was opposed from the 1970s by the **Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad**, poets and the Save **Silent Valley** campaign. They argued extinction risk for a unique evergreen tract, including the lion-tailed macaque habitat. **Indira Gandhi's government** stopped the dam. The area became **Silent Valley National Park** in the 1980s. It is the template: science plus a popular movement, before the 1994 **EIA notification**, still deciding a "development" outcome.

Narmada / Sardar Sarovar. The **Narmada Bachao Andolan**, with **Medha Patkar** and allied groups, used satyagraha, the **Morse independent review** for the World Bank, and long Supreme Court litigation to contest displacement and the height of **Sardar Sarovar**. The Bank stepped back. The Supreme Court eventually **allowed raising the dam with rehabilitation conditions**, so the activists did not "win a no-dam world", but they **forced rehabilitation onto the clearance bargain** and made EIA-style social impact a national argument.

Vedanta bauxite, Niyamgiri, Odisha. **Dongria Kondh** Adivasis, with activists and later **Amnesty and local groups**, opposed **Vedanta's** bauxite mine on a hill they hold sacred. The Supreme Court in **2013** required **gram sabhas** to decide. The sabhas **refused**. The mine did not go ahead. That is FRA plus EIA logic in one holding: a forest community can say no, and an appraisal that skips that no is not a real clearance.

Sterlite copper, Thoothukudi (Tuticorin), Tamil Nadu. Neighbourhood groups and environmental activists long alleged **SO2 and effluent** harm from **Vedanta's Sterlite** smelter. After a proposed expansion, **May 2018** protests met police firing and deaths. The **State government ordered permanent closure**. Courts have since wrestled with that order, but the EIA-expansion path was **broken by mass local refusal**, not by a quiet expert committee. (A parallel Odisha story is **POSCO's** Jagatsinghpur steel-plant plan, opposed over betel-vine land and forest clearance; the company **exited**. Niyamgiri remains the cleaner Supreme Court peg.)

- **Peg:** **Silent Valley** and Niyamgiri show a project stopped. Narmada shows conditions and a national debate. Sterlite shows a working plant shut after a public rupture.
- **Peg:** Influence is not a veto in every statute; it is the conversion of a hearing into a political fact the appraiser cannot honestly ignore.

Flow diagram

EIA hearing -> NGOs and locals
NGOs and locals -> Courts FRA sabhas
Courts FRA sabhas -> Stop condition or close
Silent Valley -> Stop condition or close
Niyamgiri -> Stop condition or close
Sterlite -> Stop condition or close

Conclusion

NGOs and activists shape EIA outcomes through hearings, FRA sabhas, courts and public cost. **Silent Valley**, Narmada, Niyamgiri and Sterlite Tuticorin show stoppage, conditions, community refusal and closure. A major project that treats them as noise produces a clearance that does not survive contact with the ground.

Facts & figures

Silent Valley

Kerala hydel project dropped after a 1970s-80s science-and-people campaign; later notified as a national park.

Narmada Bachao Andolan

Movement against displacement by Sardar Sarovar and related dams; Morse review and Supreme Court litigation.

Niyamgiri, 2013

Supreme Court required gram sabha consent for Vedanta bauxite on Dongria Kondh land; the sabhas said no.

Sterlite, Thoothukudi

Vedanta copper smelter; May 2018 protests and police firing; State ordered permanent closure.

EIA notification

The Union environment ministry's process (1994, recast 2006, later drafts) for scoping, hearing and clearance of listed projects.

POSCO Odisha

Jagatsinghpur steel project opposed on land and forest grounds; the company eventually withdrew.