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Q8(a)

Discuss the role of environmental movements in shaping environmental governance in India.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 1 · 20 marks · Indian Nationalism

Indian Nationalism: Political Strategies of India's Freedom Struggle; Perspectives on Indian National Movement; Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Ambedkar, and the socialists.

Core demand of the question

- Define environmental governance in India (20 marks)
- Show how movements shaped law, institutions, and the meaning of development
- Discuss Chipko, Narmada, and related struggles; link to courts, EIA, and federal policy
- Assess how far governance changed, and remaining limits

Revision summary

Environmental governance in India is the official system for allocating forests, water, land, and pollution costs.

Chipko politicised forest felling as a livelihood and women's issue and weakened a purely contractor-and-department model.

Narmada contested large dams, displacement, and rehabilitation, forcing public justification even when the project proceeded.

Laws, EIA hearings, the NGT, constitutional environmental duties, and Gram Sabha-related rights are institutional responses to movement pressure.

The development state was not replaced; it was compelled to add procedures and to argue in public, which is the movements' principal shaping effect.

Introduction

Environmental governance is the set of rules, agencies, and practices that decide who may use land, forest, water, and air, and who bears the cost. In India that governance was long a development-state affair: dams, mines, and forest departments in the lineage of colonial reservation and **Nehru's** plans. Environmental movements forced that affair into public argument. They did not replace the state. They changed what the state had to justify.

Body

Chipko and the forest public

The Chipko movement in the Uttarakhand Himalaya in the 1970s made forest policy a question of local livelihood, not only of timber contracts. Villagers, including women, hugged trees and demanded a say in felling. The movement linked **Gandhi's** local swaraj to ecology. It influenced later forest law debates, joint forest management talk, and the idea that hill women are environmental actors. Governance shifted from a purely departmental file to a recognised local claim, even when implementation remained uneven.

Narmada and the large-dam state

The **Narmada Bachao Andolan** contested displacement, the meaning of public purpose, and the quality of rehabilitation in the Sardar Sarovar and related projects. It used satyagraha, research, international advocacy, and the Supreme Court. The Court in 2000 allowed the dam to proceed under conditions, which showed both the reach and the limit of movement litigation. Environmental governance absorbed new rituals: environmental impact assessment, public hearings, and rehabilitation policies. It did not abandon the large-project model. The movement still changed the decision process. A dam now has to answer in public, which is a **Habermas-like** demand inserted into a planning state.

Other pressures and institutional response

Silent Valley, anti-mining struggles, urban clean-air litigation, and coastal protests similarly pulled ministries and courts. The 42nd Amendment's environmental duties, **Articles 48A and 51A(g)**, the **Environment (Protection) Act, 1986**, the **Forest Conservation Act**, the National Green Tribunal, and EIA notifications are the legal sediment of crisis and mobilisation, not only of expert design. **Pressure groups and scientists entered clearance committees. Federal tension appeared: states want projects; local communities want veto or voice. The Gram Sabha under the 73rd Amendment** and later forest-rights legislation gave a statutory hook for local environmental will, which the question on Gram Sabha also names.

How far

Movements shaped governance by agenda-setting, by producing knowledge that official plans omitted, and by forcing procedures of hearing and clearance. They did not produce a consistently ecological state. Clearances can be ritual. Violence against activists continues. Growth politics still ranks high. The honest discussion is that environmental governance in India is a contested field that movements opened. Chipko and Narmada are the type-cases. The **Planning Commission's** successor still thinks in projects; it must now do so under a louder local and judicial check.

Flow diagram

Environmental movements -> Chipko forests
Environmental movements -> Narmada dams
Environmental movements -> EPA EIA NGT
Environmental movements -> Gram Sabha / local voice
Development state -> EPA EIA NGT

Conclusion

Environmental movements made forests, rivers, and displacement into national political issues and pushed the state toward assessment, hearings, tribunals, and local statutory voice. Chipko and Narmada show the pattern. Governance was reshaped as procedure and as argument, not as a complete change of development model. That partial reshaping is still a major political fact.

Facts & figures

Chipko, 1970s

Himalayan villagers, with strong women's participation, resisted commercial felling and claimed local rights over forests.

Narmada Bachao Andolan

A long campaign against displacement by the Narmada valley projects, combining protest, research, and Supreme Court litigation.

Environment (Protection) Act, 1986

Umbrella statute under which EIA and many later environmental regulations were issued, after Bhopal and mounting movement and expert pressure.

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