

# Environment, Media and the Indian Society: A Review of the Management Issues of the Media Houses

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## **Abstract**

Mass participation of conscious citizens is needed to maintain clean environment. To ensure this participation, we need more public consciousness and here the role of the media is important. So it is quite legitimate to study the performance of the media in influencing public attitude and government policy. Studies show that media coverage of environment, both in the West and in India, have grown since 1970. Later, the research findings on Global Warming made environment a global concern. The Television and film in developed countries continuously focused on environment. In India, however, Television and film have not paid much attention to environment. Some critics believe, after adopting economic liberalization, media portrayed environmental movements as obstruction to industrialization and thereby harmful to development of the nation. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the big media houses have initiated several environment protection programmes with the support from the corporate world.

**Keywords:** Environmentalism, Media, Sociology of Environment, Conservation, Development, Corporate Social Responsibility, Environmental Movement, Television, Print Media, Economic Liberalisation.

## **1. Introduction**

It is a legitimate question that how far the media has been able to spread environmental awareness in the real sense? Or, is the media competent enough to spread awareness? Has the media failed miserably in arousing the sense of responsibility towards environment? Why the media is unable to encourage people sufficiently to preserve environment? The questions require closer examination of the representation of the environmental issues in the media. This paper focuses on the factors that determine environment reporting in India and the related management issues of media houses. The discussion is based on the observation of media reporting and on the study of secondary sources. Attempt has been made to compare the Indian situation with the West.

## 2. Experience in the West

Before the 1970s, not many initiative for the projection of environmental awareness can be seen in the western films. The same, though with lesser emphasis, can also be said about the western media. Since 1960s, however, a drastic change was visible. Hannigan, after studying the research works on environment reporting, has narrated the growth of environment reporting in the west (Hannigan 2006)<sup>1</sup>. The focus on environment was prominent in the media during the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, both in United States and in Britain the journalists found it hard to understand the basic position of environmentalism – ‘that everything is connected to everything else.’ They also found it problematic to link conservation with contemporary environmental problems (ibid: 82). It was gradually recognized that even a constant reality like environment is required to be given a thought upon for protection and conservation. Thus, environment developed as a major news category in Britain and in America. The problems faced by the individuals, like pollution incidents, were viewed as ‘part of a more general problem of the environment’ (ibid).

There were ‘several key events’ that raised environmental awareness of the media (Hannigan 2006:82). The Santa Barbara oil blowout incident took place in 1969. The 1970s witnessed the efforts at saving the environment. Since 1970, the celebrations of “Earth day” started. The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm, Sweden from June 5-16 in 1972. Since 1974, World Environment Day celebration started on 5<sup>th</sup> June every year. These celebrations were covered by the media and environmental pollution became a topic for discussion (ibid). In the year 1973-74, there was a huge energy crisis. This made the nations of the west think deeply about the natural resources. The concern was circulated through the mass media. However, at that time, the global environmental concern was not there. The environmental hazards in the third world countries were yet to catch the eye of the western press.

The concern about the environment began to widen since mid 1980s. The idea of Global Environment – interlinkage of environment at world level – began to emerge. In the summer of 1988, the mercury level on weather thermometers started to rise in abnormal proportion in North America. Henceforth, thanks to the scientific research, people started worrying about “*Global Warming*”. This matter got special attention

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<sup>1</sup> Hannigan’s description is based on the following works: Howenstine 1987 ; Hansen 1991; Einsiedal and Coughlan 1993; Morrison et al 1972; Roth 1978; Parlour and Schatzow 1978; Brookes et al 1976; Lacey and Longman 1993 ; Smith 1992 ; Tuchman 1978; Schoenfeld et al 1979.

in the eyes of mass media. (Hannigan 2006: 89). Undoubtedly, it is the threat of Global Warming that made the western media more concerned about the global environment.

With the passage of time, discussions and interest on nature increased. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Cable TV became popular. Then came the channels which aired programs on environment. The channels like National Geographic, Discovery, Animal Planet etc started catching the attention of the viewers in large numbers. Several magazines with specific focus on environment also came up. The making of documentary movies on the matters of environment also became a trend.

The documentary – “*An inconvenient truth*” (2006), set an alarming notion across the world about *Global warming*. Hollywood movies like “*The day after tomorrow*”(2004) and “*Avatar*” (2009) made people aware throughout the globe about the state of environment. Several other films can be mentioned here that touched the issues related to environment, such as “*Chinatown*” (1974), “*Silent Green*”(1973), “*Hotel Rider*”(2003), “*Fern Gully: The last rainforest*”(1992), “*China syndrome*”(1979), “*Erin Brochovich*” (2000), “*Wall-E*” (2008) and many more. Other than the ones mentioned here several other films have been made in the west regarding environmental hazards.

### 3. Indian Print Media

In India, the environmental movement began in 1970, in the Himalayan region, with the famous Chipko Andolon. Thereafter, in different places, poor villagers and tribals protested against the degradation of natural resources due to commercial activities. According to noted historian Ramchandra Guha, “Unlike in the West, where environmentalism was given birth to by scientists, in India it began through the protest of rural communities” (Guha 2008).

But in 1970s, Guha points out, there was little attention paid to environmentalism in India by the politicians and intellectuals. The situation changed in 1980s and the environment attracted huge and ‘mostly positive’ attention from the media. Several noted columnists wrote on environmental issues in different Indian languages: Anil Agarwal, Darryl D’Monte and Usha Rai in English; Raj Kumar Keswani and Shekhar Pathak in Hindi; Nagesh Hegde in Kannada (Guha 2008).

In 1990-91, the national media extensively covered the Narmada Bachao Andolon and the movement against the construction of Tehri dam in present day Uttarakhand (Warrier 2016). Warrier comments, ‘Much of the national media were sympathetic to the cause of the displaced tribal people. There was public support for the cause of the weaker communities’ (ibid: 57).

The picture changed in the middle of 1990s. The Economic Liberalisation policy, adopted in India in early 1990s, created the opportunity for rapid industrialization and thereby the possibility to generate jobs

in large scale. Secondly, the growing connection with the developed countries, helped to spread consumerism in India. Individual choice became more important than the sufferings of the poor fellow citizens. The environmentalists in that context were viewed as backward looking and obstructionists to development of the nation. Guha states, 'From the mid-1990s, a series of sharp attacks on environmentalists began appearing in national press' (Guha 2008).

Deeper into 1990s, the educated middle class drew sustenance from the economic liberalization and their support for the poor, fighting natural resource degradation, declined (Warrier 2016: 57). Change in the attitude of the middle class was reflected in the shift in the attitude of the media. Warrier argues that several protest movements received little media attention in 1990s, e.g. protest against power plant promoted by Enron Corporation in Dabhol of Maharashtra, protest against nylon manufacturing project of Thapar DuPont Ltd in Goa and protest against Sterlite Corporation in Ratnagiri Maharashtra. According to Warrier, the agitation against the nuclear power plant at Jitapur (Maharashtra) and Kudankulam (Tamil Nadu) got less attention (ibid: 59).

But in 2008, Guha felt, 'It may be that the anti-environmental backlash has finally run its course. If not the facts on the ground, the growing global concern with climate change could bring the question of sustainable development back into centre-stage' (Guha 2008).

Undoubtedly, people became more aware regarding environment. More reports about environment are being printed in the newspapers. A Kolkata-based NGO, "DISHA"(Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action) has published compilations of all the environment related reports that appeared in the newspapers of Kolkata from 2008 to 2010 (Deb 2009, Deb 2010, Deb 2011). From these volumes, it is clear that the matters concerning environment are getting considerable space in the newspapers and many issues are covered. Similarly, "*The Hindu*", which is amongst the top English newspapers in India, has published a few special editions with important articles on different environment issues witnessed in different parts of India. Those volumes were named "*The Hindu Survey of Environment*". A research report prepared after examining the news items published in top four English newspapers in India, Indian Express, The Hindu, Hindustan Times and Times of India, from 1<sup>st</sup> December 2010 to 7<sup>th</sup> December 2010, stated that several environmental issues have been included in newspapers, such as – alteration in humidity, global warming, pollution, wildlife, utilization of energy, protection of environment, food protection, natural disasters etc. (Durrani and Parveen 2013).

There is another notable development. Today, the environmentalists too have started penning down their observations for the media. For instance - the writings of Maneka Gandhi and Bittu Sehgal are being regularly published in "The Statesman". There are Journals like "Down to Earth" which deals with environmental issues. In Bengali too such kind of publications exist, e.g. "*Ban*", "*Aranyak*" etc.

#### 4. Television and Films

Similar to the newspapers, in the TV news channels in India, the discourses on environment have certainly taken a rise. The Television channels, as a whole, have continuously covered environmental degradation, industrial pollution and the movements for environment conservation. Of course there are differences among the channels in degree of emphasis. Some news channels are not even interested in weather forecast regularly. Some talk about environment only in time of crisis and whenever the environment is a cause of conflict between two sides.

Though the TV news channels have covered environment in recent times, the case with the TV entertainment shows is different. The TV medium can feature documentary movies or news series or popular TV serials to attract the viewers to spread awareness. In this context, it would not be a blatant lie to comment that the Indian Television media has not fully used the resources in that direction. Let us take up the TV serials first. Such shows are hugely popular across India for decades. In the 1980s, two Hindi TV serials, “*Rakshak*” and “*Appu and Pappu*,” became popular with the morale of environment conservation. Both these programmes were aired on Doordarshan. In fact, Doordarshan was the only TV channel at that time. But later, though there had been manifold increase in the number of TV channels, but there wasn't noticed much interest amongst the serial makers regarding environment. The TV serial makers showed more interest with family drama for commercial reasons.

Similarly, for higher TRP, the news channels are more interested in political affairs than with environment. It is a fact that very few Indian Television channels telecast documentaries on environment. The news magazine on NDTV named “*Born Wild*” is an exception. It focuses on the present state of the reserved forest areas in India. The Indian TV industry as a whole is reluctant to promote documentaries. The film festivals too offer limited opportunities and very limited audience. So, documentary films do not get fund and platform they require. Search in Internet shows several sites displaying list of documentary movies made on environment. In these lists, the number of documentaries having India connection is negligible. Undoubtedly, no list is all inclusive and all the lists may be challenged for their subjective preferences. However, at least, these lists indicate that the documentaries on environment, made in India, have not yet received much attention at the world stage.

Now let us shift our attention to Indian feature films. Here the situation is worse. I have interacted with many people and most of them could not think of any cinema, either in Bengali or in Hindi, on environment. And a few who could, mentioned unanimously “*Safed Hati*”, a Hindi movie made in 1978. It is quite surprising that till 2018 no other remarkable movie has been made with a focus on environment

in a country where the film industry is ever growing. Once again let's mention the lists on cinemas on environment in Internet. Again I repeat that there exists serious doubt regarding information provided by Wikipedia, and many more sites in Internet. However, absence in the lists of environmental movies in the Internet makes it quite evident that not many significant films are made on environment in India. Richard Edward, a British environment activist, expressed his grievance in this regard. He is the chief of the world's largest film festival on wildlife and environment – "*Wild Screen Festival*". Edward in his interview in "The Hindu" on 21<sup>st</sup> February, 2011 had said, "If there is a little bit of an attempt from mainstream cinema like Bollywood to present issues on environment and wildlife, then it helps us reach more audience"(PTI 2011).

## 5. Media and Corporate sponsored programmes

In the last decade a new trend has emerged. Some big corporate houses, as well as the big media houses, are enthusiastically participating in environment protection programmes. Many celebrities from the world of politics, music, films, and sports take part in such efforts (Kar 2015:50). Often the big corporate and the media houses join hands to execute these initiatives as corporate social responsibility. Such programmes receive massive coverage by the media partners.

One such notable program is the NDTV-Toyota Green Campaign, started in 2008, to create awareness about climate change and energy use in villages. This program was sponsored by Toyota. Other companies like Nokia, Coca-Cola, Voltas and CII also joined the programme. To generate environmental awareness, long Telethon was organized and marathon man Milind Soman ran fifteen hundred kilometers in thirty days. The run was acknowledged as a record in the Limca Book of Records. The Environment ministers in different times, from different governments, showed support to the initiative. As a part of this project, seedlings were distributed amongst people in Bangalore and Hyderabad. Chennai's Eliot coast, Srinagar's Dal lake and Gomati River in Lucknow were cleansed. Corporate houses like Nokia and Coca cola also came forward to help. Due to this mass attempt a huge amount of sum was collected. The fund was used for recycling plastics in big cities and for Electronic waste disposal. Besides, a large amount of this sum was used for sending solar lanterns to more than six hundred villages.<sup>2</sup>

NDTV also initiated "NDTV-Aircel Save Our Tigers Campaign" in 2010, in collaboration with Sanctuary Asia, India's premiere wildlife magazine and the Wildlife Conservation Trust. The campaign was sponsored by Aircel. The main motto of this promotion was to spread the awareness for Tiger Conservation. The first year promotion was a twelve hour long Telethon. Through this programme several

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<sup>2</sup> <http://green.ndtv.com/aboutus.aspx>, accessed on 25.07.2018

reputed and famed people came forward with a plea to the political leaders to take steps for tigers' protection. A comparatively loud response was achieved from the political leaders. The fund collected through various programs was donated to appropriate agencies and NGOs working in this field<sup>3</sup>.

Like NDTV, Zee News too was seen to come forward with environmental awareness programs. A promotion program was started in 2010 namely "My Earth My Duty". The prime motive behind this program was to spread awareness regarding climate change and environment protection. It is claimed that within a year the message reached 50 million people. As a part of the programme, in a single day 7.3 million saplings were planted in the rural and urban areas. This massive attempt got recorded in the "Limca Book of Records". The program won several coveted awards. Zee News also initiated "My Earth My Duty" award. There are twelve fields of environment protection activities in India where this award is given. For its environment mission, Zee Media collaborated with – Ministry of Youth, Para Military Forces – BSF, ITBP, CRPF, Ecological Task Force, NCC, Brahmakumari Samaj, Centre for Media Studies and others. Many celebrities joined the initiative.<sup>4</sup>

Since 2015, The Times of India in collaboration with the forest department, NGOs and spiritual organizations, and Hero MotoCorp, initiated to plant lakhs of saplings of native species in cities like Delhi, Chandigarh, Indore, Ahmedabad, Chennai, Pune, Dehradun and Nagpur (Times News Network 2018).

The India Today Group introduced a new segment in its award ceremony 'Swachhata hi Seva Champions' and it actively participated in building toilets. For such Clean India Campaign, the Media House has come out with idea of India Today Safaigiri Awards.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <http://tiger.ndtv.com/aboutourcampaign.aspx>, accessed on 25.07.2018

<sup>4</sup> [http://zeenews.india.com/news/nation/fourth-edition-of-indias-biggest-environment-awareness-initiative-my-earth-my-duty-to-kickstart-from-august-1-2013\\_865306.html](http://zeenews.india.com/news/nation/fourth-edition-of-indias-biggest-environment-awareness-initiative-my-earth-my-duty-to-kickstart-from-august-1-2013_865306.html), accessed on 25.07.2018

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/safaigiri-2017/story/swachh-bharat-safaigiri-2017-aroon-purie-keynote-address-1056420-2017-10-02>, accessed on 25.07.2018

Therefore, in recent days, several media houses are seen taking up attempts at protecting environment in India to demonstrate Corporate Social Responsibility. However, the way in which these events are presented, require close study.

## 6. Conclusion

There is no doubt about the fact that the media has great potential to influence public attitude towards environment.

As mentioned earlier, there was widespread coverage of environment in India in 1980s. According to Guha, the massive and favourable media coverage had lead to some positive development. For example, the Department of Environment was established in 1980, and five years later it was upgraded into a full-fledged Ministry of Environment and Forest. The State Governments too set up environment ministries. Perhaps due to continuous media coverage, several scientists became interested in research in the field of environment and some reputed institutes began to offer environment related courses (Guha 2008).

How far-fetched the contribution of media can be, regarding the protection of environment, is clear from the following instance. After the release A documentary, "*Shores of silence*"(2000), a pressure was created upon the Indian government to stop the mass killing of sea animals and hence a law was enacted.<sup>6</sup>

It is a fact that a large number of people today in India are continuously updated about environment through media. Environmental pollution, global warming, sporadic rainfall, increasing incidents of death due to lightning – all these find place in the daily conversations. In recent time, social media is proving to be an important space to exchange views on environment. But still there are issues with reporting about environment.

From a close observation of the media, it appears that generating awareness regarding environment protection is not the primary concern for the mainstream media. Environment is a mere component of news for them. In India, which is the largest democracy in the world, political affairs and entertainment attract most of the public attention. However, environmental issues sometimes get linked to politics and receive media coverage. After the announcement of the Swach Bharat Mission by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the national media, on a regular basis, reported about the progress of work and on the status of environment in different parts of India.

In some cases, the fight against the degradation of natural resources turns out to be a political affair and receive media coverage. In fact, many a times, media view environment as nothing but a source of

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<sup>6</sup> "Films that make a difference: The online Library of Conservation Films"; <http://www.filmsthatmakeadifference.org/the-online-library-of-conservation-films/category-1-films-that-have-made-a-difference/shores-of-silence-whale-sharks-in-india/>, accessed on 17.07.2018

conflict – such as one between industrialists and farmers, or between the government and workers of NGOs, or between man and animal. According to Hannigan, ‘The media situate the environment as the locus for rancorous conflict’ (Hannigan 2006: 90). It is true for the West as well as for India. Often, this conflict becomes the chief point of attraction, not the main environmental issue. Sometimes, this conflict is dramatized and presented before the mass and the real issue about environment protection does not receive the necessary attention.

However, sometimes, the conflicts had some positive effects. After economic liberalization, environmentalism in India became a concern of the middle class (Warrier 2016:59). A group of enthusiast people, like lawyer Mahesh Chandra Mehta and environment-activist Subhas Datta of West Bengal, took several matters to the court. In mid-1990s, India witnessed ‘judicial activism’. Supreme Court of India delivered several important judgments for environment protection. The court cases were reported by the media and that played a role in generating environmental awareness in the country.

It is true that there is a growing interest about environment in the developed countries like India. There is a section of the foreign media that has invested lots of time and money in environment and in India they have received massive attention. The channels like National Geographic, Discovery, Animal Planet for example. For the last few years, Discovery channel airs programmes in Indian languages. This initiative proves that there is an audience for such programmes. However, the Indian Television industry has not taken any effort to tap that market. In general, it has decided not to take any risk and has preferred to focus only on conventional areas like politics, entertainment and business.

There is one more factor responsible for the limited coverage of environmental issues in news channels. It is the question of development. News channels till date mainly measure development in terms of economic growth and industrialisation. But often, it is observed that environment of an area is threatened by industrial activities. Then, the degradation of nature, which also affects local livelihood and lifestyle, invites protest from the environmental activists and local people. They try to stop the industrial projects. This is the Development versus environment debate. In situations like this, the media is often accused of being biased towards ‘development’. Then the movements are viewed not to serve the cause of environment but an attempt to halt the economic development of the nation. From this perspective, environment doesn’t get its due. It has been mentioned earlier that there was a backlash against environmental activists after economic liberalization in India.

However, the situation has changed. Now the media views environmental problems as disturbance to daily normal life. So, the issues like pollution get significant media space. The air pollution of Delhi is regularly reported by the national media. The environment activists and the experts in the field are interviewed by the reporters and the knowledgeable persons are invited to Television discussion.

However, it appears that the media is more interested in technology-based solution and in effective legal measures rather than questioning the philosophy of capitalist development.

Hannigan has stated several management issues behind attaching least significance to environment by the media. For him, one major reason being the lack of knowledge about environment on the part of the journalists. Therefore, many a times, the media does not go into the depth of the issues and gives a mono causal explanation of the problem. Sometimes, for the media, the result of an issue becomes more important rather than its cause. Environment is a complicated matter, which is linked with many factors. Due to insufficient understanding, and time constraint to frame a report, the journalists often take help of the experts. But, this does not always solve the problems. Often the opinions of the experts vary. But again, the journalists fail to judge the views and the genuineness of the information. To maintain neutrality, they publish both the news with equal emphasis. As a result, the audience fails to understand the correct position (Hannigan 2006: 87).

The criticisms against the media have some merit. The Media houses appoint specialized journalists for various programs and news, for example – sports, politics, economics, share market, movies, crime and even food. But these media houses do not care much to appoint specialist journalists for environment. However, in recent times, there are some signs of change. We can name two journalists who have gained fame for their environmental reporting in Television channels – Bahar Dutt and Swati Thiyagarajan. Dutt worked with CNN-IBN as the Environment Editor. Thiyagarajan is the Environment Editor of NDTV and she presents a TV show named “Born Wild”. Now there is a definite rise in the number of journalists covering environment in India. Search through Google gives lists like “Environmental Journalists in India” or “Environmental Columnists in India.” The prestigious Ramnath Goenka Award includes the category of environment reporting for both the print and the Television section. There is also The Curshaw Irani Prize for Environmental Reporting. All these indicate that the situation is changing, at least at the national level.

It is true that compared to the earlier times, the media has been taking more interest in environment now. There is a financial angle that deserves mention. ‘Environment’ today is a saleable item. That added a new dimension to media coverage of environment. A few years after economic liberalization, environment became an industry and a profession for the middle class (Warrier 2016: 59). Green Technology, promising to reduce pollution level, offered employment opportunities for skilled people. There is also a rise in the demand for Eco friendly Products. As a result now the media is often seen promoting ‘nature friendly’ items like ayurvedic medicines or eco- tourism destinations through news and advertisements.

That apart, various efforts for the protection of the environment, particularly at the grass root level, are often shown by the media. Ramchandra Guha in his T.N.Khoshoo Memorial Lecture on 24 March, 2008 urged the media to look beyond the protest movements and bring the excellent research works done on environment by the experts to the public forum (Guha 2008). Ten years later it can be said that though not completely, but to some extent, the mainstream media has moved in that direction. Interesting innovations often find space as news items. A major progress can be seen in social media too. The efforts for conservation are widely shared. However, though the 'scientific' methods for conservation or the 'alternative' ways to save the environment have been gained noticeable ground in the news, the environmentalism has not received its due attention.

There are questions also for the media coverage of event specific programmes. As discussed earlier, in the last two decades, the interest of the mainstream media is growing for the events related to environment protection. From Hannigan writings, it is understandable that such kind of interest is not unique to India, it is a universal trend. The corporates sponsor such programmes as corporate social responsibility and such programmes also serve the purpose of publicity of their brands. The problem is that in these cases rather than the issues, the celebrities attending the event receive attention and the fund raised gets highlighted. The trending development philosophy, which is the main culprit for environmental degradation, is never put to criticism. May be this is normal for advertisement dependant mass media.

Though there is a huge scope for the media in protecting the environment through continuous objective factual reporting, but the media in India is yet to play its role with full potential. Some media houses have initiated environment protection programmes, but they are limited to the big media houses in comparatively bigger cities.

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