The state of India’s natural environment has perhaps never looked bleaker: polluted air, water, and soil, rapidly-disappearing green cover, endless seas of plastic, and a lingering fear of more climate change and environmental destruction to come. In 2014, the World Health Organization named India’s capital New Delhi as the world’s most polluted city. New Delhi remains among the most polluted cities in the world, and other Indian cities have joined it. In August 2018, the southern Indian state of Kerala experienced its worst floods in over a century. Towards the end of August 2018, there was a whiff of news of floods in India’s northeastern states, but media coverage of the northeast has always been sparse in comparison to other, more accessible areas.

How the media cover environmental stories and represent nature is determined by a host of cultural, social, political, and economic factors. Neoliberal policies, ushered in after the 1991 economic reforms, have strained natural resources and ecosystems, and given multinational corporations more power to use the environments of India to their advantage. Ramachandra Guha (2006) has argued that neoliberalism has led to an “anti-green backlash,” where environmentalists (defenders of the natural environment) are often seen as an impediment to growth. Writing about the environment therefore carries with it challenges. Yet, good journalism is essential, as Robert W. McChesney (2016) argues, to “assess people in power” and those who want to be in power. McChesney’s points are applicable anywhere in the world: journalism, he suggests, needs to cover the public as well as private sector and should provide “an early warning system” allowing us to address problems before they become more difficult. He adds: “the point of journalism,
ultimately, is to make people in the public life effective participants, effective rulers, and to make self-government possible” (p. 128).

As the environmental challenges in India and in other parts of the world become more complex and are ever-deepening, environmental journalism has a tremendous task of informing, educating, and challenging the status quo. Whereas newspapers are perishing in many parts of the world, they thrive in India and invariably still have a huge role to play. However, where journalism does suffer, environmental journalism is bound to suffer with much greater intensity since environmental concerns are usually an afterthought. (The increasing use of social media across India, particularly WhatsApp, as a significant source of news and information has revealed some alarming trends, particularly with the rise and spread of fake information. In 2018, hoax messages circulated on WhatsApp led to multiple incidents of attacks and mob lynchings. At least 30 people have been murdered as a result of WhatsApp rumors (Safi, July 2018).)

This chapter provides an overview of environmental journalism and its challenges in India, examining through historical and discourse analyses the coverage of major environmental conflicts by Indian news organizations, with particular emphasis on the English print media. By drawing on past environmental issues and their coverage by the media, this chapter examines the nature and challenge of covering environmental stories in the present neoliberal era and argues that Indian environmental journalism can be divided into four phases, with the Bhopal gas disaster as an anchoring point.

Decline in environmental journalism?

Many have pointed to the general decline in mainstream media’s environmental interest (Cox, 2006, 2013), a trend that has repeated itself in India. David B. Sachsman and JoAnn Myer Valenti (2015) have argued that for American journalism, the 1990s through to the early 2000s were a “golden age,” yet the 21st century brought on a new journalistic age due to the US newspaper industry’s financial decline. Robert Cox and Phaedra C. Pezzullo (2015) state that this peak of US environmental news was reached in the early 1970s after Earth Day. Sharon Friedman (2015) writes that despite the rising complexity of environmental issues in the US, environmental news coverage started disappearing in the 1980s. Friedman discusses three factors that have impacted environmental journalism: the Internet, downsizing, and mainstreaming. (The Internet has had both positive and negative implications.)

Cox and Pezzullo write: “Even an in-depth, but complicated story about the global shortage of water may be shoved aside in favor of a more dramatic news event. Indeed, over the years, the frequency of environmental news has risen and fallen as wars, economic recession, terrorism, and other concerns have seized TV and newspaper headlines.”

Indeed “our perceptions and attitudes towards nature and environmental problems are mediated by various sources,” which include “news shows, scientific reports, films and college courses” (Cox, 2006). News media are crucial in “educating the public about environmental problems” (Cox, 2006), as news “is a key site for information, analysis and debate on public issues” (Lester, 2010). The nature of environmental coverage (how extensive and accurate it is) and the media representation of environmental issues have an impact on public “perception, attitudes and behaviour” (Cox, 2006).

Cox (2006) has suggested that media portrayal of nature may assume four themes: the “hideous and desolate wilderness,” the “pristine,” the “place where we live, work, play, and learn,” and lastly, a “natural resource.” Some environmental issues, as Cox observes, are “unobtrusive events;” issues that are “less dramatic” and “go unnoticed for years or decades” as they are far from “one’s personal experience.” Alison Anderson (1997) argues that environmental reporting
“thrive[s] on dramatic ‘events’ involving ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies.’” Lack of immediate impact may therefore make an environmental problem a “nonissue for government officials and the media” (Cox, 2006).

Cox and Pezzullo highlight the influences that determine the way news is made, “including the demand for ‘newsworthiness,’ requirements for objectivity and ‘balance’ in news stories, media frames, political economy, gatekeeping, and newsroom routines.” They argue that conflict “is an especially influential factor in news stories about the environment: environmentalists versus loggers, climate scientists versus global warming deniers, angry residents versus chemical companies, and so forth. And such stories of environmental conflict often are accompanied by visual elements – photos, film, etc. Indeed, some environmental groups like Greenpeace are known for their ability to generate newsworthy stories by their dramatic image events, which take advantage of new media’s desire for pictures, particularly images of conflict.” Alternatively, the media “may cultivate an anti-environmental attitude through a persistent lack of environmental images or by directing viewers’ attention to other, non-environmental stories” (Cox & Pezzullo, 2015).

Covering the Indian environment

Newspaper circulation in India, in contrast to most developed markets where print publications are on the decline, has seen a 60% rise between 2006 and 2016 (from 39.1 million to 62.8 million copies) (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2017; Tharoor, 2017). As of December 2017, newspaper circulation had gone up to 64.6 million (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2018). Shashi Tharoor (2017) attributes the “thriving newspaper market” to rising literacy rates, particularly in the “Hindi-speaking heartland.” The circulation numbers support this: Hindi-language newspapers have the largest share (at 39%) of circulation and have seen the fastest growth, followed by English (18.5%) (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2018). The Audit Bureau of Circulations, which is a nonprofit organization, provides language-wise circulation figures for nine major Indian languages and groups all others in a 10th category. The Times of India is the newspaper with the third highest circulation (and the first in English), after the Hindi newspapers Dainik Bhaskar and Dainik Jagran. The Hindu is the second highest circulated English newspaper (10th overall) (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2015). The Times of India, established in 1838, is India’s oldest English-language newspaper, and the world’s largest circulated English-language daily. The Hindu, started in 1878, is generally considered one of India’s best. India’s language diversity reflects on its media diversity, and hence it is impossible to characterize the Indian media in a single breath. Of India’s print magazines, some of the best known include Frontline, Outlook, and India Today. Frontline (owned by The Hindu group) has had a sustained coverage of environmental news over the years (since 1984, which is when it was established). Also, the impact of digital platforms on the production and dissemination of news is increasingly significant, as is the impact of these platforms on environmental news. Since India’s liberalization in 1991, the media’s relationship with industrial and corporate-related conflict has become murkier. This is a result of what is seen as increased “corporatization” of the Indian media, evidenced by, among others, Reliance Industries’ takeover of Network 18 (Thakurta & Chaturvedi, 2012).

Of the newspapers studied for environmental news coverage, The Hindu has a dedicated environment subsection, and together with Times of India has some of the best environmental news reporting among the mainstream media. The only magazine that is entirely dedicated to environment and science news is Down To Earth, and it has maintained its reputation as the best, most detailed source of environmental news in India. One of the best sources of environmental news online is the Indian Environmental Portal (www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in), which is
managed by the Centre for Science and Environment that also is responsible for *Down To Earth*. *(DTE* is also online: www.downtoearth.org.in) The last few years have seen a rise in online news magazines/newspapers in India. These include *Firstpost* (www.firstpost.com), which is a part of Network 18 (which runs CNN-News 18), *Scroll.In* (https://scroll.in/magazine/), *The Quint* (www.thequint.com), and *NewsLaundry*, which says it is a “media critique, news and current affairs portal” (www.newslaundry.com/about#ownership). None of these, as of 2018, have a section dedicated to environmental news, although environment-related stories are covered under “science” sections (in *Firstpost*, for instance).

**Profile: Down To Earth**

In 1980, Indian environmentalist and journalist Anil Agarwal founded the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), a nonprofit research and advocacy organization that works on environment and development issues in India. In 1992, Agrawal founded *Down To Earth*, a fortnightly magazine on science, environment, and development. *Down To Earth* has built a strong reputation as a serious (and somewhat non-mainstream) supplier of environmental news, covering some of India’s most pressing environmental concerns. The magazine’s editor is Sunita Narain, an environmentalist as well as the director general of the Centre for Science and Environment.

Since its inception, *Down To Earth* (*DTE*) has broken many stories of immediate health and environmental relevance to the Indian public. For instance, in the February 15, 2003, issue, *DTE* focused on research carried out by the CSE that proved the presence of pesticides in bottled water in India. The same year, issues on pesticides in soft drinks (August 15, 2003) and in food (December 31, 2003) were published.

Other such stories published over the years have included toys containing highly toxic chemicals (January 31, 2010), antibiotics in honey (September 30, 2010), antibiotics in chicken (August 15, 2014), and the (illegal) presence of genetically modified (GM) ingredients in processed food in India (August 15, 2018). *Down To Earth* has covered in detail and even followed up on stories not picked by the mainstream media.

As the only Indian magazine solely dedicated to environmental news, *Down To Earth* has a strong online presence with sections dedicated to air, environment, water, natural disasters, waste, energy, wildlife & biodiversity, economy, science & technology, forests, and climate change. As of August 2018, *DTE*’s website also had a dedicated section on Africa, where stories (and videos) on health issues, traditional medicine, and climate change from different parts of Africa are available.

**India’s environmentalism and the rise of environmental journalism**

For India, the dominant paradigm since its independence from Great Britain has been development (modernization, industrialization, and urbanization), and since the 1991 economic reforms these discourses have shifted to (neo)liberalization, privatization, and globalization. Thus, there is a continued emphasis on foreign investment, allowing mining and other multinational corporations to access India’s rich natural resources (particularly in areas like the east Indian state of Odisha). The necessity of “development” from within public discourse has never been shattered: much of the middle class and the media consider development as significantly more important than environmental impacts of development activities. Furthermore, mining projects are usually conducted in interior areas, tucked away from immediate, everyday view. This distance, both physical and emotional, is expressed by media coverage (or lack of) on these issues. It is harder for journalists, most of whom are placed in cities, to travel to areas where tribal people are...
The January 16–31, 2019, cover story focuses on the impact of cattle trade restrictions and “cow vigilantism” on India’s poor. Cow vigilantism refers to self-appointed cow protection groups that have attacked people suspected of being involved in slaughtering cows or consuming beef. *Down To Earth*’s editor Sunita Narain links this issue to larger environmental concerns, arguing that Indian farmers “practise an agro-silvo-pastoral system” of which livestock is a key part and, therefore, “taking away the meat would demonise their assets.”

*Source:* Published with permission, www.downtoearth.org.in
protesting as their forests are at risk of being cleared. Indeed, media coverage of environmental conflict (between Indigenous peoples and mining corporations, for instance) remains a rather challenging one (see Mishra, 2013). In the case of Indigenous people, who, in other parts of the world, have often been seen as protectors of the environment, the Indian media portrayal of Indigenous struggles reflects the widely held public view of the place of tribal and Indigenous peoples within Indian society. Often seen as “backward” and “primitive,” tribal people have conventionally been expected to develop and move closer to mainstream society. These views deeply contradict the beliefs held by tribal people themselves. So, the distance, physically and culturally, of journalists from tribal peoples and their environments, and the lack of emotional and cultural connection to them, shapes the way stories of tribal struggles over their environment are woven.

Guha (2014) has pointed out that India’s environmentalism is different from Western environmental movements, as it was born out of the struggles of the poor. This is true for the Chipko movement of the 1970s, when groups of village women prevented the commercial felling of trees by hugging them, as well as the protests over the Narmada Dam, and other environmental movements in the 1990s and 2000s. Environmental journalism, too, much like India’s environmentalism, is varied, attracting both praise for its emphasis on the poor in the past, as well as criticism that environmental journalists “have been lacking an understanding of the ‘environment’ in the Indian context” (Mahapatra, 2010, p. 22).

Environmental journalist Richard Mahapatra (2010) writes in the book *The Green Pen: Environmental Journalism in India and South Asia*: “Environmental journalism is no more the old ‘off stream’ but a ‘main-stream’ deliberation on contemporary existence. Particularly so when India has the unique distinction of being one of the fastest death-creating nations, having the largest number of poor in the world. Poverty in India is primarily environment-driven. Thus environmental journalism, overtly or covertly, is about the most mainstream issue, poverty. Every story written from a village on environment has intense global linkages.”

The connection between poverty, struggles over natural resources, and the environment plays into many environmental struggles, and thus understanding these multiple linkages is a necessity for Indian environmental journalists. The environmental journalist Lyla Bavadam (2010) argues that “the line between being a journalist and an activist is very fine” and that journalism “is about representing the underdog,” a category that includes environmental issues. She writes: “environmental journalism is about respect for life – for all forms of life. It has to goad government, corporations and citizens to take responsibility for their actions . . . and that is why environmental stories are the most challenging to write.”

I argue that Indian environmental journalism can be divided into four phases, of which the 1984 Bhopal disaster, in which a Union Carbide plant released toxic gas killing thousands, is an anchor point: pre-Bhopal, post-Bhopal, post-1991, and post-2000. Bhopal is an anchoring point as it stunned journalists; it shocked people all over the country and around the world. There were, of course, controversial environmental issues before Bhopal, but no environmental disaster shook the Indian people as did Bhopal.

The 1991 Indian economic reforms changed the way India looked at itself and this was reflected in the change in broadcasting and news in many ways. The journalist Kunda Dixit (2010) writes that it is not government control that has led to a “deficient coverage of environmental and development issues in our media . . . but the filter of over-commercialism and the concentration of media ownership.” These are aspects that have been further exacerbated in the 2000s, thus affecting the way the media cover environmental news. One of the challenges of covering development issues is that advertisers want to “gloss over” societal problems (Dixit, 2010). In a 2000 article in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, J. B. D’Souza bemoans: “more and
more editors today have turned their attention away from readers’ interest in news and views to the promotion of their publishers’ financial success. The sad effect is to make press coverage of news and views inadequate and shallow, to focus less on issues and more on personalities, to concentrate on today’s sensations but neglect follow-up.”

D’Souza states of the *Times of India*: “where else could I find so many entire pages devoted to the virtues of Santro [and] Indica [car models], and all those grand and beautiful things that I’ll never afford to buy?” Commercialization has continued well into the 2000s and beyond. In recent years, even reputed newspapers like *The Hindu* have had to place full front-page advertisements to the agony of many journalists and readers. On the Internet, issues of little significance can sometimes dominate the websites and Facebook news feeds of leading news organizations, such as New Delhi Television Limited (NDTV), whose news feeds (on Facebook) for several months in 2018 were bombarded with “news” about a Bollywood actor’s newborn child. With limited serious content in the mainstream media, it is unsurprising that environmental news, which is one of the most complex, will be subjected to more restrictions. Covering environmental news may mean challenging powerful corporations, governments, and others as well as offending potential advertisers. The amount of space given to celebrity gossip and news of little significance takes attention away from important issues. These trivial concerns become topics of debate and discussion. Where is the room for news of environmental degradation?

**Remembering Bhopal**

The Bhopal Disaster (gas tragedy) of December 1984, considered one of the world’s worst industrial disasters, was caused due to a deadly gas leak from the multinational Union Carbide pesticide plant. The incident that quickly killed around 4,000 people (8,000 in some estimates), was unlike anything Indian journalists had covered in terms of environmental news, and in many ways, it affected the future coverage of disasters. Although Bhopal received a great deal of attention in the media, most newspapers stuck to official accounts of the numbers of people dead. Early in 1984, though, a Hindi-speaking freelance journalist who had researched the dangers of the “ill-maintained” Union Carbide factory tried to sell his report to major English dailies in New Delhi but was turned down by all of them. The story was subsequently picked up by a Hindi daily (Pande, 1987).

Shalini Sharma (2014, p. 147) has argued that the representation (and contestation) of the Bhopal disaster in the media is tied to “its legal trajectory” that demonstrates the “intersecting relations between politics, business, law, and media within a highly unequal global economy.” She argues that media interest in the concerns raised by workers at the Union Carbide plant prior to the methyl isocyanate (MIC) gas leak was minimal and that the media really were unprepared to “deal critically with UCC [Union Carbide Corporation]” (p. 148). Although alternative media have provided “critical and consistent coverage” of Bhopal, mainstream media coverage has been crucial in shaping “public perception and memory of the disaster” (p. 146). Despite the initial conservative estimates of the number of people dead, (particularly in the English-language press), Bhopal received “extensive and informed media coverage . . . in the year following the disaster” (Sarangi, 1996).

I examined newspaper archives of the *Times of India*, *The Hindu*, and the *Indian Express* to determine how the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal disaster (marked on the 2nd and 3rd of December 2004) was reported in the three national dailies. Of these, only the *Times of India and The Hindu* marked the anniversary, although neither dedicated any space on the front page for the story (all front-page stories on the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th of December are political ones). *The Hindu* had three articles centered or relating to the “Bhopal tragedy” on the 2nd
of December 2004: titled “20 years on, troubling questions remain,” “Force Dow Chemicals to clean up: Lapierre,” and “Centre orders survey to destroy toxic wastes in Carbide plant.” Of these, only the first article is somewhat reflective, commenting on why Union Carbide chose to store “large quantities of lethal chemicals” in Bhopal when that wasn’t the case in their West Virginia plant. Lalit Shastri (2004) writes: “People here still want to know why the Government of India and the Government of Madhya Pradesh did not care to get adequate information about the hazardous nature of MIC and permitted Union Carbide to use such a deadly and lethal gas within city limits and store it in such huge quantities.”

The first of the Times of India’s two articles on Bhopal on December 4, 2004, was titled “Mumbai shows its solidarity with Bhopal gas victims,” which reports a candlelight vigil held by environmental activists at Mumbai’s Gateway of India. The second article was titled “BBC’s Bhopal nightmare still on,” which comments on the BBC’s broadcast of “the momentous and wholly spoof interview with one Jude Finisterra, who claimed to speak for Dow Chemical Company, which now owns Union Carbide.”

The Times of India has brought up the “Bhopal Gas Tragedy” several times over the decades. On the 25th anniversary of the disaster, in 2009, a Times article called it the “world’s worst industrial disaster” and then discussed the controversy surrounding the compensation (Verma, 2009). In this article, Subodh Verma discusses the “dimension of the ongoing tragedy of Bhopal” concerning “the poisonous chemical waste lying around in the abandoned premises of the pesticide plant.” Verma writes, “the government adopted a one-size-fits-all policy for categorization of injuries – a person with compromised lungs may ultimately develop other diseases, besides being unable to work fully.”

In The Hindu, a 2014 article that marks 30 years since Bhopal, asks: “has anything changed in India with regard to adoption of environmental safeguards before promoting industries and related projects?” (Venkat, 2014). In the article, Vidya Venkat raises the issue of inadequate compensation, the contaminated soil and groundwater “within 3.5 kilometers of the UCC factory site,” the lack of disaster preparation, and the issue of “hardly any cases of prosecution of environmental crime by corporate firms in India.”

Both The Hindu and the Times of India invoke the memory of the Bhopal disaster and highlight some of the issues that are still relevant, contamination of the site, issues with compensation, and lack of medical assistance, among others.

Despite the stories discussed above, it can be argued that considering the seriousness and the continuing issues surrounding Bhopal, the news coverage of the disaster and its aftermath has not been enough. Perhaps, in the long run, the disservice done to Bhopal shows an overall lack of interest in an issue that should have been remembered with much greater intensity and should have commanded a stronger national memory. For that, pictures are indubitably more powerful. The photograph of the dead child with open eyes being buried right after the gas leak, taken by photographer Raghu Rai and titled “Burial of an Unknown Child,” is one of the most tragic and iconic images, so symbolically attached to the Bhopal memory. However, few photographs appear in the stories about Bhopal in the mainstream media today.

Climate change and Indian news media

Climate change has arguably come out as the greatest environmental crisis of our time. India, for its part, is now the world’s third highest emitter of carbon dioxide. The way the Indian media addresses climate change has a huge impact on perception, attitudes, and action. A 2018 study of climate change and global warming coverage in Indian newspapers between 2000 and 2018 shows that Indian climate coverage peaked in December 2009, followed by December 2015,
and among the four newspapers studied, *The Hindu* and *Times of India* had the most sustained coverage of climate change and global warming (Boykoff et al., 2018). This suggests that media interest in climate issues has spiked during major international events, such as the Copenhagen Summit (2009) and the Paris Agreement (2015). The study also suggests that the four newspapers studied have seen an increased interest in climate change and global warming reporting from June 2007 onwards (2000 to 2007 shows limited coverage). The data sheet by Maxwell T. Boykoff et al. (2018) shows that between 2000 and January 2009 there was only one climate change/global warming article in the *Indian Express*.

Development is often at odds with environmental protection, and for environmental journalism this conflict is increasingly significant. Richard Mahapatra (2010) writes: “a contemporary environment journalist is often faced with this challenge [torn between the conflicting interests of development and environment]. This challenge is more daunting as economic liberalisation is the accepted mode of delivering economic goods . . . an environment reporter occasionally celebrates his or her existence in case of an extraordinary environmental event.” Mahapatra points out, as many others have, that the role of the environmental journalist has become more complicated since India’s economic liberalization in 1991, where “as the public acceptance of the new economic model deepens, environment as a public good is losing relevance.” Recent challenges for journalists include the rise of corporatization, “infiltration by political elites,” and resulting engagement in paid news (Ramaprasad, Gudipaty, & Vemula, 2015).

V. K. Natraj (2007, p. 130) provides another dimension to this discussion: “Given the expanding scope of development, the print medium along with the other media serve the cause by focusing on the constituents of development. Among them may be mentioned sensitivity to poverty, concern for equity, ecological balance and gender justice. While the campaign for all these has been aided by newspapers, perhaps their contribution is especially significant in the case of the environment. It is not improbable that the response which the public at large exudes with respect to the environment is not found to the same degree of intensity in the case of gender or equity in general.”

**Emerging patterns**

Julia Corbett’s (2006) argument that the “mainstream media by and large are conservative institutions, following the lead of prominent social actors and supporting what media perceive to be dominant values and practices” can be extended to the Indian context. Heavy reliance on government sources of information by India’s mainstream media (print and television) may result in the inadequacy of challenges to certain controversial issues, lack of deep debate, and the furthering of the status quo.

Development stories, for instance, take a precedent over environmental ones. Having said that, a study of media discourses on genetically modified (GM) food in India suggests that most Indian media are skeptical of the technology (although all other forms of agricultural technology may tend to be unchallenged or even lauded). Media coverage of GM may be more reflective of the influences of environmental organizations such as Greenpeace and the Centre for Science and Environment, which have had a critical role in informing the public about GM crops. The media, therefore, also have largely taken a critical approach towards genetic modification.

In July 2018, a Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) study found that 32% of India’s processed food tested positive for genetically modified ingredients. Given India’s precautionary stance on genetic modification, other than for Bt cotton, this news received some attention. The story was covered by a number of the country’s leading newspapers and magazines. *India Today*’s headline was “Beware! Your Food may have genetically modified toxins.” India’s most reputed television news
channel, NDTV’s (ndtv.in) headline read: “GM-Processed Food Products Being Sold Illegally in India: Study.” The Hindu generally maintained an anti-GM/anti-Bt stance. Yet, a 2009 article quoted rather positively from a conference held by the company that produced Bt brinjal, Maharashtra Hybrid Seeds Company Ltd (Mahyco), writing, “He was optimistic that the country’s farmers would prefer the Bt variety of brinjal over the conventional varieties that are prone to shoot borer diseases.” Another headline from September 2010 read: “Bt brinjal is healthy, vouches expert.”

The pattern that emerges in mainstream news media coverage of environmental news includes the use of “authority-bias” sources (such as government institutions, research organizations, hospitals, and doctors) as sole sources of information. Local is not “in.” Local sources are rarely seen as a sole source of reliable information, leading to a lack of information pluralism. The struggles of Indigenous peoples are usually seen through the lens of modernization and development. There is a widespread representation of the natural environment as a commodity. And finally, there is the unquestioning nature of mainstream media that reflects status quo (for instance, clearing of trees for a road is made to appear natural and unavoidable).

**Covering tribal peoples’ environmental struggles**

I used a discourse analytic approach to study representations of nature and tribal people’s protests against the UK-based mining corporation Vedanta between 2010 and 2012 in the east Indian state of Odisha (see Mishra, 2013) in the *Times of India* and the *Indian Express*. This revealed an authority bias and idolizing of political figures, while de-emphasizing the Dongria Kondh tribe, who themselves do not appear to be empowered. In a 2011 article, the Niyamgiri Hills are referred to as “eco-sensitive” and as home to the “primitive” Dongria Kondh (Mishra, 2011, April). The “eco-sensitive” imagery appeals to the pristine and untouched nature of the Niyamgiri Hills. Few texts analyzed used rich nature imagery in describing the hills. The “primitive” imagery regarding the tribe appears in several texts analyzed and does carry a negative connotation, suggesting a separation from (and a status below) the rest of modern, mainstream, “advanced” society. Modernization discourses tend to belittle the “traditional,” the “religious,” and inherently also the “primitive,” who must be advanced and made to fit into modernity.

An article by the columnist Tavleen Singh (2010) in the *Indian Express* titled “A primitive approach” almost rhetorically likens poor to primitive. Singh states that “the main cause of environmental degradation is extreme poverty,” which she says, “reduces people like the Dongria Kondhs of Niyamgiri to living conditions . . . that are not much better than . . . the hunter-gatherer times.” She provides a very pro-development approach to the environment and tribal peoples, even going on to state that if the Kondhs knew how rich the bauxite under their “sacred” mountain would have made them, they might not have wanted Vedanta to leave. The article links poverty to the “hunter-gatherer” image, suggesting that the Dongria Kondh are living a “backward” life and that they should have allowed Vedanta to mine their hills as that would have improved their status, and made them rich.

Both the *Times of India* and the *Indian Express* criticized the Odisha government to a great extent, more for political reasons than purely surrounding the cause of the Dongria Kondh. It was nonetheless unclear what stand each newspaper had with regard to tribal or environmental rights. For one, there were hardly any interviews with members of the Dongria Kondh tribe (just one was seen). Secondly, environmental/nature imagery was rare in both newspapers. No photographs were seen online, apart from a few on the *Indian Express* but those were limited to the Niyamgiri Hills landscape.

After a long struggle, the Indian Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Dongria Kondh in 2013.
Environmental journalism in India

Moving forward, moving backward

If communities other than the mainstream are rarely covered empathetically by the press, it is difficult to imagine that the natural environment can command respect beyond its relevance to humans. Lyla Bavadam (2010, p. 4) writes that the mindset “that stems from a ‘people first’ belief is possibly the greatest hurdle to any environmental movement and, consequently, a hurdle to journalists who write on the environment.” She points out that until recently “it was considered outrageous in India to hold a brief for the environment.” Bavadam argues that it is time “that environmental writers stopped being apologetic and wrote hard-hitting pieces about issues that are as critical and life threatening as those human rights activists work with.” She adds, “After all, environmental issues fit into the category of underprivileged, weak and helpless in exactly the same way (if not more) as the other issues that human rights activists deal with.”

Interview with environmental journalist Richard Mahapatra

I interviewed one of India’s leading journalists writing on the environment, Richard Mahapatra, who has been with *Down To Earth* since 1997. Mahapatra spoke to me about the state of environmental journalism in India, the challenges to reporting on environmental issues, as well as the uniqueness of the *Down To Earth* model. He stressed that India is an “ecological economy” and therefore the environment “is a mainstream issue,” one that should not be treated separately, but should be incorporated into all other news (such as agriculture). He spoke of the “pressures from corporate houses” and “how environmental performance is less important than ease of doing business.” These have placed significant challenges on the reporting of environmental issues. Mahapatra pointed out that “speaking about the environment has become an anti-development issue”:

Instead of writing about resources, uses, and abuses, the (mainstream media and) journalists focused on handouts about economic growth. Gradually (25 years later) they realized that economic growth wasn’t the only thing happening, but that there was a growth in the number of protests: protests against industry, water resources, forest. The local media started picking up these stories. This was read as a protest against liberalization. These protests are not ideological, but entirely economic. The mainstreaming of environment in journalism is about these protests and movements. Indian journalists still project these movements as entirely anti-development. The headline will talk about stock, investment value, etc.

Despite the challenges, Mahapatra believes that there is a surge in environmental reporting, with more journalists and media houses giving pages to environmental news (for instance, Delhi’s pollution has received front-page attention). However, he added:

Reporting, on the other hand, is shallow. For example, air pollution is reported as a seasonal issue that comes in the peak of winter, summer. No one is looking at the crisis in a way that could have influenced public opinion and could have built an informed judgment about the state of environment in the country. Last year we saw many villages in Jharkhand, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh putting up a plaque saying: we declare ourselves republic, we have the right to our forests and water. This is purely environmental. How is the media reporting this: saying that this is anti-national, Maoists. Tribal people are increasingly alienated from their land. No one is against development, but it is the way it is implemented.
Mahapatra stressed the media and editorial leadership’s inability to “understand the linkages,” particularly since “news and development have become globalized, and yet editorial leadership remains isolated”:

That’s the reason a starvation story is just another story. It’s not linked with larger, global issues. The environmental section of the Indian media has not been able to understand the bigger picture. Every disaster is reported as a disaster, but people forget about the climate change aspect. When they report about climate change, they report it as a scientific, natural development, forgetting it involves great inequality in consumption, etc.

In response to questions about *Down To Earth*’s reporting, Mahapatra told me that it was founded “at a time [1992] when the understanding of the environment was not very Indian”:

We read everything from western countries. *DTE* is not interested to capture a piece of the media market. Our motto was clear: academic rigor in popular, journalistic format. It always puts the human, Indian understanding of the environment at the core. When I say Indian-ness of understanding environment, it means in India ecology is economy. In India the forests have tigers, deer, and wildlife, but also have people. *DTE* has spent a substantial budget on newsgathering. We go to people who remain in oblivion. No other media go there.

Mahapatra pointed out that one of the main challenges stems from limited resources available to media houses to report major disasters. Another, he said, was limited interaction between journalists and scientists, despite the research done at Indian universities and research institutes. Mahapatra stated that *Down To Earth* was based on a different model, and as it is supported by the nonprofit organization the Centre for Science and Environment, it has credibility:

We have not been influenced by the market and market forces. We cover cutting-edge reporting. Our research is forensic by nature. That is why *Down To Earth* is credited with setting the agenda. Before 2002, everyone reported droughts as a natural disaster. In 2002, there were a series of consecutive severe droughts. We had the guts to say that this was a government-sponsored drought; it is human made. We took reporters to those areas. Since then, drought isn’t called a natural disaster even in the mainstream media. Yes, we are an environmental magazine – we have our inbuilt bias towards environment and justice – we have a huge alumni of reporters. *DTE* is not only a magazine, but also a legacy. What we call the *DTE* brand of journalism is journalism with a mission. It’s hardly 27 years old, but it has made its mark. We had the legendary Anil Agrawal and now Sunita Narain. We report on daily development but with our perspective. We handle multiple platforms, but we haven’t compromised on our brand.

Yet, Mahapatra also highlighted the challenges faced:

It’s difficult now – running a magazine. At the core is the question: How many read us, buy us, advertise in us? These together give us sustainability. We are not a mass corporation, we are known for our influence. Secondly, advertising. We have a longer list of advertisers whom we will not pick advertisements from, given our principles.
Environmental journalism in India

We have very few people we can choose. There are changes in the overall media sector. You have the digital, social media, website, and it’s fantastic. DTE started its website in 2002. Now we have 1.5 million page views a month on DTE. That’s an encouraging trend, but this means these are readers who help attaining our larger goal, but they aren’t paying, but are reading us. Print is where we put our rigorous journalism. I call it difficult because we are in the middle of a media change. Platforms are changing, readers are changing. In India, 65% of the population are under 30. They have grown up with one economic model. How do you tell them that the corporate house they are going to work with is a culprit? We have been sustaining ourselves. We also had to branch out: we bring out books, and annuals, State of India’s Environment. Those give us a source of revenue. We spent a substantial amount on newsgathering. Journalists are no more cheaper – that is difficult. It’s one everyone is facing, more so us.

Mahapatra was, nonetheless, optimistic about the future of environmental reporting. He said that although general media platforms in print and digital are not doing well, specialized magazines are: “I see specialized journalism like science, environment, development as having a great potential, and it’s the right time for that.”

The future

In 2015, Reporters Without Borders listed India and Cambodia as the “deadliest countries” for environmental journalists. It is unsurprising then, that only certain environmental stories could find coverage in the news media. For the large part, it may not necessarily mean indifference towards environmental issues, but may instead draw attention to lack of resources, over-reliance on official sources of information, lack of skill and knowledge in the area, financial pressures, and perhaps also an unwillingness to report stories that are not already widely known. Environmental disasters attract more interest than chronic environmental issues. Very few newspapers (and news media) have an environment section at all. In 2018, protests in Delhi against cutting down trees drew a significant amount of media attention but felling of trees in most parts of the country generally attracts little media attention. Areas away from cities are difficult to access with limited resources.

Like most journalism, which is centered on the human world, in many ways environmental reporting tends to be anthropocentric, focusing on environmental news from the angle of its human impact. The challenge lies in being able to report on environments beyond-the-human, of which infinite stories are available. Yet for any of these to be captured, a willingness to both be surprised and to surprise readers, and a willingness to challenge established norms is necessary. Also necessary are structures that allow for free, unfettered journalism of the environment that can truly effect change.

References


Environmental journalism in India

