



PEOPLE, FORESTS AND RIVERS: ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS, DEVELOPMENT AND ECOLOGICAL POLITICS IN INDIA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Environmental movements in India have long occupied a central place in critiques of development, yet they continue to remain ambivalently positioned within dominant frameworks of environmental governance and economic planning. Although struggles such as the Chipko Movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan and diverse tribal mobilisations are widely recognised as iconic forms of grassroots resistance, they remain marginal to policy regimes structured around economic growth, infrastructural expansion and extractive accumulation. This article examines Indian environmental movements not merely as reactive responses to ecological degradation but as sustained critiques of the epistemological, political and ontological foundations of postcolonial development.

Drawing on insights from political ecology, political ontology and critical development studies, the article analyses conflicts over forests and rivers as contested arenas where competing conceptions of nature, society and progress are articulated and negotiated. It argues that while political ecology has been effective in foregrounding dispossession, inequality and state-capital alliances, it has often privileged political-economic explanations at the expense of deeper ontological questions. Indigenous and subaltern ecological worldviews- particularly relational understandings of forests, rivers and landscapes as living entities are frequently acknowledged in existing scholarship but remain insufficiently theorised.

Engaging feminist political ecology and affective approaches, the article further demonstrates how environmental movements are shaped by gendered labour, emotional attachment, memory and everyday ecological practices. In doing so, it identifies critical gaps in the literature, including the instrumentalization of indigenous knowledge, the depoliticization of environmental conflict through technocratic governance and the conflation of grassroots environmentalism with eco-nationalist narratives. The article concludes by arguing for an ecocentric and ontologically plural framework capable of capturing the ethical, cultural and political significance of environmental movements in India beyond narrowly economic or managerial paradigms.

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Introduction

Indian environmental movements have occupied a distinctive yet uneasy position within India's developmental discourse. They are frequently invoked as emblematic expressions of grassroots resistance symbolized by the Chipko movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan or tribal struggles against mining yet they remain persistently marginal to dominant policy frameworks that continue to privilege economic growth, infrastructural expansion and extractive accumulation. This contradiction reflects a deeper tension between lived ecological relations and the technocratic rationalities through which development has been conceptualized and implemented in postcolonial India. Environmental movements, in this sense are not merely reactions to environmental degradation but sustained critiques of the epistemological, moral, and political assumptions that structure the developmental project itself (Gadgil & Guha, 1994; Baviskar, 2019).

A substantial body of scholarship has examined Indian environmental movements through the lens of political ecology, foregrounding conflicts over forests, rivers, land and commons as struggles over access, control and distributive justice (Gadgil & Guha, 1994; Guha, 2017). This literature has been instrumental in demonstrating that ecological degradation is not an unintended externality of development but is structurally embedded within state-led and market-oriented growth models. Yet, while political ecology has illuminated relations of power between the state, capital and marginalized communities, it has often retained a predominantly materialist orientation. Questions of ontology, affect, relationality and indigenous epistemologies

although increasingly acknowledged remain insufficiently integrated into mainstream analyses of environmental movements in India (Kumar, 2024; Sony & Krishnan, 2023).

This article argues that Indian environmental movements must be understood not only as sites of resistance to dispossession but as arenas in which alternative ecological imaginaries are articulated and contested. By examining struggles around forests and rivers, the article situates these movements within broader debates on development, environmental governance, and political ontology. In doing so, it identifies critical gaps in existing scholarship, particularly the tendency to privilege political economy over political ontology, to treat indigenous and subaltern ecological knowledge instrumentally, and to conflate plural ecological traditions with state-led eco-nationalist projects (Monika et al., 2025). Aligning with Geoforum's emphasis on political ecology, relational geographies and critical environmental governance, the article advances a framework that foregrounds environmental movements as epistemic and ontological interventions into India's developmental discourse.

Theoretical Framework: Political Ecology, Ontological Pluralism and Ecocentric Critiques of Development

This article is theoretically grounded at the intersection of political ecology, political ontology, and critical development studies, while remaining attentive to feminist and affective approaches within environmental scholarship. Together, these frameworks enable an analysis of Indian environmental movements not merely as distributive conflicts over resources but as epistemic and ontological interventions that challenge dominant developmental rationalities. Rather than privileging a single theoretical tradition, the framework adopted here is deliberately synthetic, reflecting the complex and layered nature of environmental struggles around forests and rivers in India.

Political ecology provides the foundational analytical lens for this study. Since its early formulations, political ecology has sought to demonstrate that environmental problems are inseparable from political-economic structures, power relations and historical processes (Gadgil & Guha, 1994). In the Indian context, political ecology has been particularly influential in foregrounding how colonial and postcolonial development regimes have restructured access to forests, land and water, producing systematic patterns of dispossession and ecological degradation. Conflicts over dams, mining and forestry are thus understood not as isolated environmental disputes but as outcomes of development trajectories that privilege industrial, urban and elite interests over subsistence-based livelihoods (Baviskar, 2019).

However, while political ecology has been effective in exposing the material and institutional dimensions of environmental conflict, it has often retained a predominantly political-economic orientation. This has resulted in a tendency to conceptualize environmental movements primarily as reactions to dispossession, focusing on resistance, protest and negotiation within existing developmental frameworks. As several scholars have noted, such approaches risk under-theorizing the deeper epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin development itself (Kumar, 2024). This article therefore extends political ecology by engaging with political ontology, an emerging body of scholarship that emphasizes the coexistence of multiple realities, ways of knowing and modes of being in environmental struggles.

Political ontology draws attention to the fact that conflicts over nature are not only disputes over resources or rights but also clashes between fundamentally different understandings of what nature is and how humans relate to it. In the Indian context, indigenous and tribal movements frequently articulate relational ontologies in which forests, rivers and mountains are living entities embedded in social, spiritual and ethical relations. The Niyamgiri movement exemplifies this ontological divergence, where the Dongria Kondh's resistance to mining is grounded in a cosmology that recognizes the mountain as a sacred, sentient being rather than a repository of extractable minerals (Kumar, 2024). Such perspectives directly challenge the modern/colonial ontology that treats nature as inert matter subject to management, commodification and control.

Incorporating political ontology allows this article to move beyond instrumental readings of indigenous knowledge that reduce it to a strategic resource for protest. Instead, indigenous ecological worldviews are approached as coherent systems of knowledge and ethics that contest the universality of developmentalist epistemologies. This shift is crucial for addressing a key gap in Indian environmental scholarship, where indigenous perspectives are often acknowledged rhetorically but rarely engaged as sources of theory capable of reconfiguring dominant analytical frameworks.

The concept of 'environmentalism of the poor' further enriches this theoretical approach by situating environmental movements within struggles over survival, livelihood and justice. Unlike conservationist paradigms rooted in wilderness preservation or technocratic management, environmentalism of the poor emphasizes the material dependence of marginalized communities on local ecologies and highlights how environmental degradation disproportionately affects those with the least political power (Gadgil & Guha, 1994; Maity, 2024). In India, forest and river movements have repeatedly demonstrated that environmental protection is inseparable from questions of displacement, labour and social reproduction. This perspective challenges narratives that frame environmentalism as a middle-class or elite concern, instead revealing it as a deeply political response to uneven development.

At the same time, the framework adopted here recognizes the limitations of purely materialist interpretations of environmentalism of the poor. While livelihood and subsistence are central, they do not fully capture the affective, cultural and ethical dimensions of people's relationships with forests and rivers. Recent work on affective ecologies and environmental subjectivity addresses this gap by emphasizing how emotions, memories and embodied practices shape ecological consciousness (Sony & Krishnan, 2023). Studies of river pollution movements in Kerala demonstrate that environmental awareness often emerges not through formal governance mechanisms or scientific discourse but through lived experiences of ecological loss and degradation. Rivers function here as 'immediate nature,' shaping subjectivities through everyday interaction and affective attachment.

Integrating affective ecologies into political ecology allows for a more nuanced understanding of environmental movements as processes of subject formation rather than solely as collective action against the state or capital. This is particularly relevant for river-based movements, where the degradation of water bodies disrupts not only livelihoods but also emotional and cultural ties. By foregrounding affect and relationality, the theoretical framework resists the depoliticization of environmental issues into technical problems and re-centers lived experience as a source of ecological knowledge.

Feminist political ecology (FPE) constitutes another critical component of this framework. FPE interrogates how environmental governance and resource conflicts are shaped by gendered power relations, emphasizing that access to and control over natural resources are mediated by social hierarchies of gender, caste and class (Tyagi & Das, 2020). In forest-dependent communities, women often bear the primary responsibility for collecting fuel, water and food, making them disproportionately affected by ecological degradation. Movements led by tribal and forest-dwelling women, such as those documented in Central India, reveal how environmental struggles can simultaneously challenge patriarchal norms and state authority.

Yet, feminist political ecology also exposes a persistent gap in environmental scholarship: gender is frequently treated as a supplementary variable rather than as constitutive of ecological politics. By integrating FPE with political ontology and environmentalism of the poor, this article situates gendered experiences within broader critiques of development and extractivism. This intersectional approach is essential for understanding how environmental movements negotiate multiple forms of marginalization and how ecological care is embedded in everyday labour and social reproduction.

Finally, the framework engages critically with contemporary debates on eco-nationalism and sustainable development. State-led environmental initiatives increasingly mobilize cultural and civilizational narratives to frame ecological protection as a nationalist duty, often invoking rivers and forests as symbols of national heritage (Monika et al., 2025). While such discourses appear environmentally progressive, they frequently obscure ongoing processes of displacement and extraction and marginalize dissenting voices. Similarly, the language of sustainable development seeks to reconcile ecological protection with continued economic growth, often without questioning the structural drivers of environmental degradation (Lahiry, 2025). This article adopts a critical stance toward these frameworks, viewing them as mechanisms that depoliticize environmental conflict and foreclose more radical alternatives.

Taken together, the theoretical framework of this article conceptualizes Indian environmental movements as sites where political economy, ontology, affect and ethics intersect. By synthesizing political ecology with political ontology, feminist and affective approaches and critiques of developmentalism, the framework enables an analysis that moves beyond resistance toward an understanding of environmental movements as forms of ecological world-making. This approach not only sharpens the analytical contribution of the article but also positions Indian environmental struggles as theoretically significant for global debates on development, ecology and the politics of coexistence.

Development, Dispossession and the Political Ecology of Environmental Movements

The historical roots of environmental conflict in India lie in the colonial reorganization of nature. British colonial rule transformed forests, rivers and landscapes into administratively legible and extractable resources, governed through legal regimes that prioritized revenue, commercial forestry and infrastructural control. Colonial forest laws criminalized customary practices such as shifting cultivation, grazing and forest-based subsistence, recasting forest-dwelling communities as encroachers on state property (Gadgil & Guha, 1994; Singh, 2024). Rivers were similarly reimagined as hydraulic systems to be controlled through canals, embankments and dams, subordinating local ecologies to imperial logics of productivity and order. These interventions did not merely dispossess communities materially; they reconfigured human-nature relations by imposing a utilitarian and instrumental conception of the environment.

Postcolonial development in India inherited and intensified this framework rather than dismantling it. The Nehruvian developmental state embraced large-scale infrastructural projects dams, steel plants, mining complexes and planned industrial cities as symbols of modernity, national integration and economic self-reliance (Baviskar, 2019). These projects were framed as necessary sacrifices for the collective good, even as they displaced millions and fundamentally altered ecological systems. Developmentalism thus emerged as a moral and political project in which certain populations particularly tribal, small farmers and forest dwellers were rendered expendable in the pursuit of national progress (Gadgil & Guha, 1994).

Environmental movements emerged within this context as counter-discourses to developmental triumphalism. Early forest struggles, most notably the Chipko movement in the Central Himalayas, articulated a critique rooted in subsistence ethics and moral economy. Villagers resisted commercial logging not in the name of abstract conservation but through appeals to everyday dependence on forests for fuel, fodder, water, and livelihood (Guha, 2017). Political ecology scholarship has rightly emphasized how Chipko exposed the contradictions of state forestry and the unequal distribution of ecological costs and benefits (Gadgil & Guha, 1994). However, subsequent interpretations often canonized Chipko as a singular moment, obscuring the proliferation of forest-based struggles across Central and Eastern India where extractivism, militarization and displacement became far more intense (Singh, 2024).

Tribal movements against mining, dams, and industrial projects in Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and parts of Maharashtra demonstrate that environmental resistance in India is neither episodic nor peripheral. These movements draw upon customary law, collective memory, and place-based identities to contest state-sponsored development (Singh, 2024). Yet, much of the literature frames these struggles primarily as reactions to dispossession, emphasizing loss, victimhood, and resistance. While

analytically important, these framing risks reducing environmental movements to defensive politics, overlooking their capacity to articulate alternative ecological orders and ethical relations with nature (Kumar, 2024).

River-based movements further illustrate this tension. The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) emerged as a powerful challenge to large dams and technocratic development, linking displacement, democracy, and ecological sustainability (Gadgil & Guha, 1994; Baviskar, 2019). At its height, the NBA articulated a radical critique of development itself, questioning not only the social and ecological costs of dams but the epistemological authority of engineers, planners, and economists. However, over time, the terrain of struggle shifted. As large dams continued to be built despite protests, environmental politics around rivers increasingly moved into courts, expert committees and regulatory institutions (Baviskar, 2019). Rivers began to be framed in terms of ‘flows,’ ‘health,’ and ‘management,’ signalling a broader depoliticization of environmental conflict under neoliberal governance.

This shift reflects a larger transformation in environmental governance in India, where dissent is increasingly accommodated through technical and legal mechanisms rather than mass mobilization. While such strategies have yielded partial gains, they have also narrowed the scope of critique, re-centering expertise and managerial rationality (Lahiry, 2025). The result has been a dilution of the radical ethical and political questions that animated earlier environmental movements. Political ecology has documented this transformation, but it has often done so without fully interrogating the epistemological assumptions that underpin technocratic governance itself (Baviskar, 2019).

Beyond Resistance: Affect and Ecocentric Imaginaries

Recent scholarship has begun to challenge the limitations of resistance-centered analyses by foregrounding ontology, affect, and relationality within environmental politics. These interventions mark an important shift within political ecology, moving beyond distributive conflicts toward questions of how different worlds are enacted through environmental struggles. Studies of river pollution movements in Kerala, for example, demonstrate how environmental subjectivities emerge through embodied engagement, memory and emotional attachment to rivers (Sony & Krishnan, 2023). Here, care for the environment is not produced primarily through environmental education or governance but through lived relationships with ‘immediate nature,’ complicating dominant narratives of environmentality.

Similarly, scholarship on indigenous movements such as the Niyamgiri struggle foregrounds relational ontologies in which mountains, forests, and rivers are understood as living beings rather than inert resources (Kumar, 2024). The Dongria Kondh’s defense of Niyamgiri is not simply a claim to land or livelihood but an assertion of a world in which human and non-human beings are mutually constitutive. This ontological stance directly challenges the modern/colonial separation between nature and society that underpins extractive development. Importantly, such movements do not merely resist development projects; they contest the universality of the epistemological frameworks through which development is justified.

Despite these advances, several critical gaps persist in the literature. First, Indian environmental scholarship continues to privilege political economy over political ontology. While issues of dispossession, inequality, and state-capital alliances are well theorized, the ontological assumptions of development particularly the treatment of nature as inert, divisible, and governable remain under-examined (Kumar, 2024). Indigenous ecological philosophies and Indian traditions of ecocentrism are often invoked symbolically but rarely engaged as sources of theory capable of unsettling dominant epistemologies.

Second, feminist political ecology has demonstrated the gendered dimensions of environmental conflict, particularly in forest commons and subsistence economies. Women’s roles in managing fuel, water, and forests position them at the forefront of environmental struggles, as seen in movements led by Adivasi and forest-dwelling women (Tyagi & Das, 2020). However, gender remains insufficiently integrated into broader analyses of development, nationalism, and environmental governance. Feminist insights are frequently treated as complementary rather than constitutive of ecological politics, limiting their analytical reach in deeply stratified socio-ecological contexts (Tyagi & Das, 2020).

Third, contemporary debates increasingly conflate environmental movements with eco-nationalism. State-led initiatives mobilize religious and civilizational idioms to frame ecological protection as a nationalist duty, often invoking rivers, forests, and landscapes as symbols of cultural heritage (Monika et al., 2025). While such discourses appear to foreground environmental concerns, they frequently marginalize dissenting voices and obscure ongoing displacement and extraction. Much of the literature does not adequately distinguish between plural, justice-oriented ecological traditions and exclusionary eco-nationalist appropriations, risking the depoliticization of grassroots environmentalism (Monika et al., 2025).

Finally, and most crucially, Indian environmental scholarship has yet to fully confront the limits of development itself. While critiques of displacement and ecological degradation are robust, fewer studies interrogate growth as an ontological project that reorganizes human-nature relations in fundamentally extractive ways (Lahiry, 2025). Environmental movements are thus often analyzed as correctives to flawed development rather than as challenges to the very idea of development as linear progress and accumulation. This analytical gap has significant implications for how environmental politics is understood and how alternative futures are imagined.

Conclusion: Environmental Movements as Ontological Interventions

Indian environmental movements must be understood not only as struggles over resources but as critical interventions into the meaning of development, ecology, and collective life. By foregrounding forests and rivers as relational spaces rather than extractable assets, these movements challenge the epistemic foundations of modern developmentalism (Gadgil & Guha, 1994;

Kumar, 2024). Aligning with the concerns of *Geoforum*, this article argues for a shift in analytical focus from resistance alone toward the ontological and ethical possibilities embedded in environmental struggles.

Recognizing environmental movements as sites of ecological world-making allows scholars to move beyond technocratic and nationalist appropriations of nature and to engage seriously with ecocentric, relational, and justice-oriented alternatives. In an era of accelerating climate crisis and extractivism, the theoretical stakes of Indian environmental movements extend far beyond the subcontinent. They offer critical insights into how development itself might be reimagined not as domination over nature but as an ethical negotiation of coexistence between human and non-human worlds.

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