

Chapter 1

The Environmentalism of the Poor¹

The environmentalists in any area seemed very easy to identify. They were, quite simply, members of the local aristocracy... The environmental vision is an aristocratic one... It can only be sustained by people who have never had to worry about security.

(US journalist William Tucker, 1977)

The first lesson is that the main source of environmental destruction in the world is the demand for natural resources generated by the consumption of the rich (whether they are rich nations or rich individuals and groups within nations)... The second lesson is that it is the poor who are affected the most by environmental destruction.

(Indian journalist Anil Agarwal, 1986)

THE ORIGINS OF CONFLICT

When India played South Africa in a cricket international in Calcutta, the great Indian cricketer, Sunil Gavaskar, was asked by a fellow television commentator to predict the likely winner. 'I tried to look into my crystal ball,' answered Gavaskar 'but it is clouded up by the Calcutta smog.' He might well have added: 'To clear it I then dipped my crystal ball in the river Hooghly [which flows alongside the city's cricket stadium], but it came up even dirtier than before.'

The quality of air and water in Calcutta is representative of conditions in all Indian cities; small wonder that foreign visitors come equipped with masks and bottles of Perrier. Less visible to the tourist, and to urban Indians themselves, is the continuing environmental degradation in the countryside. Over 100 million hectares, or one-third of India's land area, has been classed as unproductive wasteland. Much of this was once forest and land ground; the rest, farmland destroyed by erosion and salinisation. The uncontrolled exploitation of groundwater has led to an alarming drop in the

water table, in some areas by more than five metres. There is an acute shortage of safe water for drinking and domestic use. As the ecologist Jayanta Bandyopadhyay has remarked, water rather than oil will be the liquid whose availability (or lack of it) will have a determining influence on India's economic future.²

The bare physical facts of the deterioration of India's environment are by now well established.³ But more serious still are its human consequences, the chronic shortages of natural resources in the daily life of most Indians. Peasant women have to trudge further and further for fuelwood for their hearth. Their menfolk, meanwhile, are digging deeper and deeper for a trickle of water to irrigate their fields. Forms of livelihood crucially dependent on the bounty of nature, such as fishing, sheep-rearing or basket-weaving, are being abandoned all over India. Those who once subsisted on these occupations are joining the band of 'ecological refugees', flocking to the cities in search of employment. The urban population itself complains of shortages of water, power, construction material and (for industrial units) of raw material.

Such shortages flow directly from the abuse of the environment in contemporary India, the too rapid exhaustion of the resource base without a thought to its replenishment. Shortages lead, in turn, to sharp conflicts between competing groups of resource users. These conflicts often pit poor against poor, as when neighbouring villages fight over a single patch of forest and its produce, or when slum dwellers come to blows over the trickle of water that reaches them, one hour each day from a solitary municipal tap. Occasionally they pit rich against rich, as when the wealthy farmers of the adjoining states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu quarrel over the water of the river Kaveri. However, the most dramatic environmental conflicts set rich against poor. This, for instance, is the case with the Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada river in central India. The benefits from this project will flow primarily to already pampered and prosperous areas of the state of Gujarat, while the costs will be disproportionately borne by poorer peasants and tribal communities in the upstream states of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. These latter groups, who are to be displaced by the dam, are being organised by the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement), which is indisputably the most significant environmental initiative in India today.

The 'Indian environmental movement' is an umbrella term that covers a multitude of these local conflicts, initiatives and struggles. The movement's origins can be dated to the Chipko movement, which started in the Garhwal Himalaya in April 1973. Between 1973 and 1980, over a dozen instances were recorded where, through an innovative technique of protest, illiterate peasants – men, women and children – threatened to hug forest trees rather than allow them to be logged for export. Notably, the peasants

were not interested in saving the trees *per se*, but in using their produce for agricultural and household requirements. In later years, however, the movement turned its attention to broader ecological concerns, such as the collective protection and management of forests, and the diffusion of renewable energy technologies.⁴

The Chipko movement was the forerunner of and in some cases the direct inspiration for a series of popular movements in defence of community rights to natural resources. Sometimes these struggles revolved around forests; in other instances, around the control and use of pasture, and mineral or fish resources. Most of these conflicts have pitted rich against poor: logging companies against hill villagers, dam builders against forest tribal communities, multinational corporations deploying trawlers against traditional fisherfolk in small boats. Here one party (e.g. loggers or trawlers) seeks to step up the pace of resource exploitation to service an expanding commercial-industrial economy, a process which often involves the partial or total dispossession of those communities who earlier had control over the resource in question, and whose own patterns of utilisation were (and are) less destructive of the environment.

More often than not, the agents of resource-intensification are given preferential treatment by the state, through the grant of generous long leases over mineral or fish stocks, for example, or the provision of raw material at an enormously subsidised price. With the injustice so compounded, local communities at the receiving end of this process have no recourse except direct action, resisting both the state and outside exploiters through a variety of protest techniques. These struggles might perhaps be seen as the manifestation of a new kind of class conflict. Where 'traditional' class conflicts were fought in the cultivated field or in the factory, these new struggles are waged over gifts of nature such as forests and water, gifts that are coveted by all but increasingly monopolised by a few.

There is, then, an unmistakable material context to the upsurge of environmental conflict in India; the shortages of, threats to and struggles over natural resources. No one could even suggest, with regard to India, what two distinguished scholars claimed some years ago with regard to American environmentalism, namely that it had exaggerated or imagined the risk posed by ecological degradation.⁵ All the same, the environmentalism of the poor is neither universal nor pre-given – there are many parts of India (and the South more generally) where the destruction of the environment has generated little or no popular response. To understand where, how and in what manner environmental conflict articulates itself requires the kind of location-specific work, bounded in time and space, that social scientists have thus far reserved for studies of worker and peasant struggles.

This chapter focuses on an environmental conflict that was played out between 1984 and 1991 in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. This conflict is perhaps not as well known outside India as the Chipko or Narmada movements. But its unfolding powerfully illustrates the same, countrywide processes of resource deprivation and local resistance.

CLAIMING THE COMMONS IN KARNATAKA

On 14 November 1984, the government of Karnataka entered into an agreement with Harihar Polyfibres, a rayon-producing unit located in the north of the state; the company forms part of the great Indian industrial conglomerate owned by the Birla family. By this agreement a new company was formed, called the Karnataka Pulpwoods Limited (KPL), in which the government had a holding of 51 per cent and Harihar Polyfibres held 49 per cent. KPL was charged with growing eucalyptus and other fast-growing species of trees for the use by Harihar Polyfibres. For this purpose, the state had identified 30,000 hectares of common land, spread over four districts in the northern part of Karnataka. This land was nominally owned by the state (following precedents set under British colonial rule, when the state had arbitrarily asserted its rights of ownership over non-cultivated land all over India), but the grass, trees and shrubs standing on it were extensively used in surrounding villages for fuel, fodder and other materials.⁶

The land was granted by the state to KPL on a long lease of 40 years, and for a ridiculously low annual rent of one rupee per acre. As much as 87.5 per cent of the produce was to go directly to Harihar Polyfibres; the private sector company also had the option of buying the remaining 12.5 per cent. All in all, this was an extraordinarily advantageous arrangement for the Birla-owned firm. The government of Karnataka was even willing to stand guarantee for the loans that were to finance KPL's operations: loans to be obtained from several nationalised banks, one of which was, ironically, the National Bank of Agriculture and Rural Development.

For years before the formation of KPL the wood-based industry, faced with chronic shortages of raw material, had been clamouring for captive plantations. Forests were being depleted all over India; in fact, this deforestation had itself been caused primarily by over-exploitation of trees to meet industrial demand. Although the state had granted them handsome subsidies in the provision of timber from government forests, paper, rayon and plywood companies were keen to acquire firmer control over their sources of supply. Indian law prohibited large-scale ownership of land by private companies: in the circumstances, joint-sector companies (i.e., units jointly owned by the state and private capital) provided the most feasible

option. Indeed, no sooner had KPL been formed than industrialists in other parts of India began pressing state governments to start similar units with their participation and for their benefit.

But, of course, paper and rayon factories were not alone in complaining about shortages of woody biomass. A decade earlier, the Chipko movement had highlighted the difficulties faced by villagers in gaining access to the produce of the forests. In the wake of Chipko had arisen a wide-ranging debate on forest policy, with scholars and activists arguing that state forest policies had consistently discriminated against the rights of peasants, tribals and pastoralists, while unduly favouring the urban-industrial sector.⁷

There was little question that, as a result of these policies, shortages of fuel and fodder had become pervasive throughout rural India. In Karnataka itself, one study estimated that while the annual demand for fuelwood in the state was 12.4 million tonnes (mt), the annual production was 10.4 mt – a shortfall of 16 per cent. In the case of fodder, the corresponding figures were 35.7 and 23 mt, respectively – a deficit of as much as 33 per cent.⁸

The fodder crisis in turn illustrated the crucial importance of species choice in programmes of reforestation. From the early 1960s, the government's Forest Department had enthusiastically promoted the plantation of eucalyptus on state-owned land. In many parts of India, rich, diverse natural forests were felled to make way for single-species plantations of this tree of Australian origin. As in the Thai district of Pakham (discussed in the Introduction), this choice was clearly dictated by industry, for eucalyptus is a quick growing species sought after by both paper and rayon mills. But it is totally unsuitable as fodder – indeed, one reason eucalyptus was planted by the Forest Department was that it is not browsed by cattle and goats, thus making regeneration that much easier to achieve. Environmentalists deplored this preference for eucalyptus, which was known to have negative effects on soil fertility, water retention and on biological diversity generally. Eucalyptus was, moreover, a 'plant which socially speaking has all the characteristics of a weed', in that it benefited industry at the expense of the rural poor, themselves hard hit by biomass shortages. These critics advocated the plantation and protection instead of multi-purpose, indigenous tree species more suited for meeting village requirements of fuel, fodder, fruit and fibre.⁹

In the context of this wider, all-India debate, the formation of KPL seemed a clearly partisan move in favour of industry, as the lands it took over constituted a vital, and often irreplaceable, source of biomass for small peasants, herdsmen and wood-working artisans. Within months of its establishment, the new company became the object of severe criticism. In December 1984, the state's pre-eminent writer and man of letters, Dr Kota Shivram Karanth, wrote an essay in the most popular Kannada daily, calling on the people of Karnataka to totally oppose 'this friendship

between Birlas and the government and the resulting joint-sector company'.

The opposition to KPL grew after 15 July 1986, the date on which the state actually transferred the first instalment of land (3,590 hectares) to KPL. Even as the company was preparing the ground for planting eucalyptus, petitions and representations were flying thick and fast between the villages of north Karnataka (where the land was located) and the state capital of Bangalore, 250 miles to the south. The Chief Minister of Karnataka, Ramkrishna Hegde, was deluged with letters from individuals and organisations protesting against the formation of KPL; one letter, given wide prominence, was signed by a former Chief Minister, a former Chief Justice and a former Minister, respectively. Meanwhile, protest meetings were organised at several villages in the region. The matter was also raised in the state legislature.¹⁰

In the forefront of the movement against KPL was the Samaj Parivartan Samudaya (Association for Social Change, SPS), a voluntary organisation working in the Dharwad district of Karnataka. The SPS had in fact cut its teeth in a previous campaign against Harihar Polyfibres. It had organised a movement against the pollution of the Tungabhadra river by the rayon factory, whose untreated effluents were killing fish and undermining the health and livelihood of villagers living downstream. On 2 October 1984 (Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary), SPS held a large demonstration outside the production unit of Harihar Polyfibres; then in December 1985, it filed a public interest litigation in the High Court of Karnataka against the State Pollution Control Board for its failure to check the pollution of the Tungabhadra by the Birla factory.¹¹

Before that petition could come up for hearing, SPS filed a public interest writ against Karnataka Pulpwoods Limited, this time in the Supreme Court of India in New Delhi. SPS was motivated to do so by a similar writ in the state High Court, filed by a youth organisation working among the farmers in the Sagar *taluka* (county) of the adjoining Shimoga district. Here, in a significant judgement, Justice Bopanna issued a stay order instructing the Deputy Commissioner of Shimoga to ensure that common land was not arbitrarily transferred to KPL, and that villagers be allowed access to fodder, fuel and other usufruct from the disputed land.¹²

Submitted in early 1987, the Supreme Court petition was primarily the handiwork of SPS. The petitioners spoke on behalf of the 500,000 villagers living in the region of KPL's operations, the people most directly affected by the action of the state in handing over common land to one company. The transferred land, said the petition, 'is the only available land vested in the village community since time immemorial and is entirely meant for meeting their basic needs like fodder, fuel, small timber, etc. Neither agriculture could be carried out, nor the minimum needs of life, such as leaves, firewood and cattle fodder could be sustained without the use of the

said lands.'

In this context, the petition continued, the arbitrary and unilateral action of the state amounted to the passing of 'control of material resources from the hands of common people to capitalists'. This was a 'stark abuse of power', violating not just the general canons of social justice but also two provisions of the Indian Constitution itself: the right to fair procedure guaranteed by Article 14, and the right to life and liberty (in this case, of the village community) vested under Article 21 of the Constitution. Finally, the petitioners contended that the planting of monocultures of Eucalyptus, as envisaged by KPL, would have a 'disastrous effect on the ecological balance of the region'.¹³

The arguments of equity and ecological stability aside, this petition is notable for its insistence that the lands in contention were common rather than state property, 'vested in the village community since time immemorial'. Here the claims of time and tradition were counterposed to the legal status quo, through which the state both claimed and enforced rights of ownership. In this respect the petition was perfectly in line with popular protests in defence of forest rights, which since colonial times have held the Forest Department to be an agent of usurpation, taking over by superior physical force land which by right belonged to the community.¹⁴

On 24 March 1987, the Supreme Court responded to the petition by issuing a stay order, thus preventing the government of Karnataka from transferring any more land to KPL. Encouraged by this preliminary victory, SPS now turned to popular mobilisation in the villages. In May, it held a training camp in non-violence at Kusnur, a village in Dharwad district, where 400 hectares of land had already been transferred to KPL. A parallel organisation of villagers, the Guddanadu Abhivruddi Samiti (Hill Areas Development Committee) was initiated to work alongside SPS. The two groups held a series of preparatory meetings in Kusnur and other villages nearby for a protest scheduled for 14 November 1987, to coincide with the third anniversary of the formation of KPL.

On 14 November, about 2,000 people converged at Kusnur. Men, women and children took an oath of non-violence in a school yard, and then proceeded for a novel protest, termed the Kithiko-Hachiko (Pluck-and-Plant) *satyagraha*. Led by drummers, waving banners and shouting slogans, the protesters moved on to the disputed area. Here they first uprooted 100 saplings of Eucalyptus before planting in their place tree species useful locally for fruit and for fodder. Before dispersing, the villagers took a pledge to water and tend the saplings they had planted.¹⁵

The next major development in the KPL case was the partial vacation, on 26 April 1988, by the Supreme Court of the stay it had granted a year previously. Now it allowed the transfer of a further 3,000 hectares to KPL (such interim and ad hoc grants of land were also allowed in 1989 and

1990).¹⁶ The court seeming to have let them down, SPS prepared once more for direct action. They commenced training camps in the villages, planned to culminate in a fresh Pluck-and-Plant *satyagraha*. Meanwhile, journalists sympathetic to their movement intensified the press campaign against KPL.¹⁷

The mounting adverse publicity, and the prospect of renewed popular protest, forced the government of Karnataka to seek a compromise. On 3 June 1988, the Chief Secretary of the state government (its highest ranking official) convened a meeting attended by representatives of SPS, KPL and the Forest Department. He suggested the setting up of a one-man commission, comprising the distinguished ecologist Madhav Gadgil, to enquire into the conflicting claims (and demands) of the villagers and KPL. Until the commission submitted its report, KPL was asked to suspend its operations in Dharwad district, and SPS to withdraw its proposed monsoon *satyagraha*.

The setting up of committees and commissions is of course a classic delaying tactic, in India resorted to by colonial and democratic governments alike, to defuse and contain popular protest. In this case, the government had no intention of formally appointing the Madhav Gadgil Commission, for the ecologist was known to be a critic of the industrial bias of state forest policy,¹⁸ and likely to report adversely on KPL. Thus the commission was never set up; in response, SPS started organising another Pluck-and-Plant *satyagraha* for 8 August 1988. This time, however, the protesters were arrested and removed before they could reach KPL's eucalyptus plot.

In later years, non-violent direct action continued to be a vital plank of SPS's strategy. In an attempt to link more closely the issues of industrial pollution and the alienation of common land, it organised in August 1989, in the towns of Hangal and Ranibennur, public bonfires of rayon cloth made by Harihar Polyfibres. The burning of mill-made cloth recalled the bonfires of Manchester textiles during India's freedom movement. Whereas that campaign stood for national self-reliance or *swadeshi*, this one affirmed *village* self-reliance by rejecting cloth made of artificial fibre. The following year, 1990, SPS reverted to its own patented method of protest. On Indian independence day (15th August), it invited the respected Chipko leader Chandi Prasad Bhatt to lead a Pluck-and-Plant *satyagraha* in the Nagvand village of the Hirekerrur taluka of Dharwad.¹⁹

While these protests kept the issue alive at the grassroots, SPS continued to make use of the wider political and legal system to its advantage. Through friendly contacts in the state administration, it obtained copies of four orders issued in 1987 by the Chief Conservator of Forests (General), an official known to be particularly close to the Birlas. By these orders he had transferred a further 14,000 hectares of forest land to

KPL, an area far in excess of what the Supreme Court had allowed. On the basis of these 'leaked' documents, SPS filed a further Contempt and Perjury petition in October 1988.

Meanwhile, the SPS persuaded public sector banks to delay the release of funds to KPL, pending the final hearing and settlement of the case in the Supreme Court. It had also effectively lobbied the government of India in New Delhi to clarify its own position on KPL-style schemes. In February 1988, an official of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, making a deposition in the Supreme Court, stated unambiguously that the raising of industrial plantations by joint-sector companies required the prior permission of the government of India. Later the same year, a new National Forest Policy was announced, which explicitly prohibited monocultural plantations on grounds of ecological stability. In June 1989 the Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Forests wrote to the government of Karnataka expressing his disquiet about the KPL project.

Within Karnataka, resolutions asking the government to cancel the KPL agreement were passed by local representative bodies, including several *Mandal Panchayats*, local councils each representing a group of villages, as well as the *Zilla Parishad* (district council) of Dharwad. This was followed by a letter to the Chief Minister, signed by 54 members of the state legislature and sent on 11 July 1990, asking him to close down KPL so as 'to reserve village common land for the common use of villagers'. With public opinion and the central government arrayed against it, and possibly anticipating an adverse final judgement in the Supreme Court, the government of Karnataka decided to wind up KPL. The company's closure was formally announced at a board meeting on 27 September 1990, but by then KPL had already ceased operations. In its report for the previous financial year (April 1989 to March 1990) the company complained that 'during the year the plantation activity has practically come to a standstill, excepting raising 449 hectares of plantations'— a tiny fraction of the 30,000 hectares of common land it had once hoped to capture for its exclusive use.

A VOCABULARY OF PROTEST

The struggle against KPL had as its mass base, so to speak, the peasants, pastoralists, and fisherfolk directly affected by environmental abuse. Yet key leadership roles were assumed by activists who, although they came from the region, were not themselves directly engaged in production. Of the SPS activists involved more or less full-time in the movement, one had been a labour organiser, a second a social worker and progressive farmer, a third a biology PhD and former college lecturer, and a fourth an engineer who

had returned to India after working for years in the United States. Crucial support was also provided by intellectuals more distant from the action. These included the greatest living Kannada writer, Dr Shivram Karanth, a figure of high moral authority and for this reason the first petitioner in the Supreme Court case against KPL. A co-petitioner was the Centre for Science and Environment, a respected Delhi-based research and advocacy group whose influence in the media and in the government was shrewdly drawn on by the activists from Karnataka.

This unity, of communities at the receiving end of ecological degradation and of social activists with the experience and education to negotiate the politics of protest, has been characteristic of environmental struggles in India. In other respects, too, the SPS-led struggle was quite typical. For underlying the KPL controversy were a series of oppositions that frame most such conflicts in India: rich versus poor, urban versus rural, nature for profit versus nature for subsistence, the state versus the people. However the KPL case was atypical in one telling respect, for environmental movements of the poor only rarely end in emphatic victory.

To put it in more explicitly ecological terms, these conflicts pit 'ecosystem people' – that is, those communities which depend very heavily on the natural resources of their own locality – against 'omnivores', individuals and groups with the social power to capture, transform and use natural resources from a much wider catchment area; sometimes, indeed, the whole world. The first category of ecosystem people includes the bulk of India's rural population: small peasants, landless labourers, tribals, pastoralists, and artisans. The category of omnivores comprises industrialists, professionals, politicians, and government officials – all of whom are based in the towns and cities – as well as a small but significant fraction of the rural élite, the prosperous farmers in tracts of heavily irrigated, chemically fertilised Green Revolution agriculture. The history of development in independent India can then be interpreted as being, in essence, a process of resource capture by the omnivores at the expense of ecosystem people. This has in turn created a third major ecological class: that of 'ecological refugees', peasants-turned-slum dwellers, who eke out a living in the cities on the leavings of omnivore prosperity.²⁰

In this framework, the 'environmentalism of the poor' might be understood as the resistance offered by ecosystem people to the process of resource capture by omnivores: as embodied in movements against large dams by tribal communities to be displaced by them, or struggles by peasants against the diversion of forest and grazing land to industry. In recent years, the most important such struggle has been the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), the movement representing the ecosystem people who face imminent displacement by a huge dam on the Narmada river in central India. The movement has been led by the forty-year-old Medha

Patkar, a woman of courage and character once described by a journalist as an 'ecological Joan of Arc'.

A detailed analysis of the origins and development of the Narmada conflict cannot be provided here,²¹ but there is one aspect of the movement that is of particular relevance to this book; namely, its flexible and wide-ranging vocabulary of protest.

The term 'vocabulary of protest' is offered as an alternative to Charles Tilly's well-known concept of the 'repertoire of contention'. Tilly and his associates have done pioneering work on the study of dissent and direct action. Their work has focused on the techniques most characteristic of different societies, social groups or historical periods. Tilly's own understanding of direct action tends to be a narrowly instrumental one, with participants drawing on, from a broader repertoire of contention, those techniques which most effectively defend or advance their economic and political interests.²² But in fact techniques of direct action have at the same time an utilitarian and an expressive dimension. In adopting a particular strategy, social protesters are both trying to defend their interests *and* passing judgement on the prevailing social arrangements. The latter, so to say, ideological dimension of social protest needs to be inferred even when it is not formally articulated – the fact that protesting peasants do not distribute a printed manifesto does not mean that they do not have developed notions of right and wrong. In field or factory, ghetto or grazing ground, struggles over resources, even when they have tangible material origins, have always also been struggles over meaning. Thus my preference for the term 'vocabulary of protest' – for 'vocabulary' more than 'repertoire', and 'protest' more than 'contention' – helps to clarify the notion that most forms of direct action, even if unaccompanied by a written manifesto, are both statements of purpose and of belief. In the act of doing, protesters are saying something too. Thus the Kithiko-Hachiko *satyagraha* was not simply an affirmation of peasant claims over disputed property: as a strategy of protest, its aim was not merely to insist, 'This land is ours', but also, and equally significantly, to ask, 'What are trees for?'

To return to the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Like the anti-KPL struggle, the Narmada movement has operated simultaneously on several flanks: a strong media campaign, court petitions, and the lobbying of key players such as the World Bank, which was to fund a part of the dam project. Most effectively, though, it has deployed a dazzlingly varied vocabulary of protest, in defence of the rights of the peasants and tribal communities which were to be displaced by the dam.

These strategies of direct action might be classified under four broad headings. First, there is the collective *show of strength*, as embodied in demonstrations (Hindi: *pradarshan*) organised in towns and cities. Mobilising as many people as they can, protesters march through the town,

shouting slogans, singing songs, winding their way to a public meeting that marks the procession's culmination. The aim here is to assert a presence in the city, which is the locus of local, provincial or national power. The demonstrators carry a message that is at once threatening and imploring: in effect, telling the rulers (and city people in general), 'do not forget us, the dispossessed in the countryside. We can make trouble, but not if you hand out justice'.

Second, there is the *disruption of economic life* through more militant acts of protest. One such tactic is the *hartal* or *bandh* (shut-down strike), wherein shops are forced to down shutters and buses to pull off the roads, bringing normal life to a standstill. A variation of this is the *rasta roko* (road blockade), through which traffic on an important highway is blocked by squatting protesters, sometimes for days on end. These techniques are rather more coercive than persuasive, spotlighting the economic costs to the state (or to other sections of the public) if they do not yield to the dissenters.

Whereas the *hartal* or *rasta roko* aim at disrupting economic activity across a wide area, a third type of action is more sharply focused on an individual target. For instance, the *dharna* or sit-down strike is used to stop work at a specific dam site or mine. Sometimes the target is a figure of authority rather than a site of production; thus protesting peasants might *gherao* (surround) a high public official, allowing him to move only after he has heard their grievances and promised to act upon them.

The fourth generic strategy of direct action aims at putting moral pressure on the state as a whole, not merely on one of its functionaries. Pre-eminent here is the *bhook hartal*, the indefinite hunger strike undertaken by the charismatic leader of a popular movement. This technique was once used successfully by Sunderlal Bahuguna of the Chipko movement; in recent years, it has been resorted to on several occasions by Medha Patkar, the remarkable leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan. In the *bhook hartal*, the courage and self-sacrifice of the individual leader is directly counterposed to the claims to legitimacy of the state. The fast is usually carried out in a public place, and closely reported in the media. As the days drag on, and the leader's health perilously declines, the state is forced into a gesture of submission – if only the constitution of a fresh committee to review the case in contention.

The *bhook hartal* is most often the preserve of a single, heroic, exemplary figure. A sister technique, also aimed at *shaming the state*, is more of a collective undertaking. This is the *jail bharo andolan* (literally, 'movement to fill the jails'), in which protesters peacefully and deliberately court arrest by violating the law, hoping the government would lose face by putting behind bars large numbers of its own citizens. The law most often breached is Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, invoked, in anticipation of social tension, to prohibit gatherings of more than five people.

The *pradarshan*, *hartal*, *rasta roko*, *dharna*, *gherao*, *bhook hartal* and *jail bhara andolan* are some of the techniques which make up the environmental movement's vocabulary of protest. This is a vocabulary shared across the spectrum of protesting groups, but new situations constantly call for new innovations. In the 1970s, peasants in Garhwal developed the idiosyncratic but truly effective Chipko technique; in the 1980s, the SPS in Dharwad, opposing eucalyptus plantations, thought up the Kithiko-Hachiko *satyagraha*; and now, in the 1990s, the Narmada Bachao Andolan has threatened a *jal samadhi* (water burial), saying its cadres would refuse to move from the villages scheduled for submergence even after the dam's sluice gates are closed and the waters start rising.

The techniques of direct action itemised above have, of course, deep and honourable origins. They were first forged, in India's long struggle for freedom from British rule, by Mohandas Karamchand 'Mahatma' Gandhi. In developing and refining this vocabulary of protest, Gandhi drew on Western theories of civil disobedience as well as traditions of peasant resistance within India itself.²³

In fact, Mahatma Gandhi provides the environmental movement with both a vocabulary of protest and an ideological critique of development in independent India. (The 'environmental' ideas of Mahatma Gandhi are discussed more fully in Chapter 8.) The invocation of Gandhi is thus conducted through what might be called a rhetoric of betrayal. For the sharpening of environmental conflict has vividly brought to light the failed hopes of India's freedom struggle. That movement commanded a mass base among the peasantry, assiduously developed by Gandhi himself, and freedom promised a new deal for rural India. And yet, after 1947 the political élite has worked to ensure that the benefits of planned economic development have flown primarily to the urban-industrial complex.

The KPL case illustrates this paradox as well as any other. On one side were the peasants and pastoralists of north Karnataka; on the other, an insensitive state government in league with the second largest business conglomerate in the country. As one protester expressed it in Kusnur: 'Our forefathers who fought to get rid of the foreign yoke thought that our country would become a land of milk and honey once the British were driven out. But now we see our rulers joining hands with the monopolists to take away basic resources like land, water and forests from the (village) people who have traditionally used them for their livelihood.' In much the same vein, a Chipko activist once told the present writer: 'After independence, we thought our forests would be used to build local industries and generate local employment, and our water resources to light our lamps and run our flour mills.' But to his dismay, the Himalayan forests continued to service the paper and turpentine factories of the plains, and the rivers were dammed to supply drinking water to Delhi and electricity

to the national grid which feeds into industries and urban agglomerations all over India. While private industry has thus gained privileged access to natural resources, the burden of environmental degradation has fallen heavily on the rural poor. To invoke a slogan made famous by the Narmada Bachao Andolan, this has been a process of 'destructive development' – destructive both of rural society and of the natural fabric within which it rests. In a bitter commentary on this process, the common people of Dharwad district have come to refer to the noxious air outside Harihar Polyfibres as 'Birla Perfume', to the water of the Tungabhadra river as 'Birla Teertha' (holy water of the Birlas), and to the eucalyptus as 'Birla Kalpataru' (the Birla wonder tree).²⁴

The environmental movement's return to Gandhi is then also a return to his vision for free India: a vision of a 'village-centred economic order' that has been so completely disregarded in practice. Perhaps it is more accurate to see this as a rhetoric of betrayal *and* of affirmation, as symbolised in the dates most often chosen to launch (or end) programmes of direct action. These dates are 2 October, Gandhi's birth anniversary; 15 August, Indian Independence Day; and most poignantly, 8 August, on which day in 1942 Gandhi's last great anti-colonial campaign was launched, the Quit India movement – in invoking this environmentalists are asking the state and the capitalists, the rulers of today, to 'quit' their control over forests and water.

TWO KINDS OF ENVIRONMENTALISM

In the preceding sections of this chapter, the KPL controversy has been used to outline the origins, trajectory and rhetoric of the environmental movement in India. In conclusion, let us broaden the discussion by briefly contrasting the 'environmentalism of the poor' with the more closely studied phenomenon of First World environmentalism. This analysis derives, for the most part, from my own research on the United States and India, two countries, ecologically and culturally diverse, but at very different 'stages' of economic development. These are the countries and environmental movements I know best, and yet, because of their size and importance, they might be taken as representative, more generally, of the North and the South.²⁵

I begin with the origins of the environmental impulse in the two contexts. Environmental movements in the North have, I think, been convincingly related to the emergence of a post-materialist or post-industrial society. The creation of a mass consumer society has not only enlarged opportunities for leisure but also provided the means to put this

time off work to the most diverse uses. Nature is made accessible through the car, now no longer a monopoly of the élite but an artefact in almost everyone's possession. It is the car which, more than anything else, opens up a new world, of the wild, that is refreshingly different from the worlds of the city and the factory. In a curious paradox, this 'most modern creation of industry' becomes the vehicle of anti-industrial impulses, taking one to distant adventures, to 'homey little towns, enchanting fairy tale forests, far from stale routine, functional ugliness or the dictates of the clock'.²⁶ Here lies the source of popular support for the protection of wilderness in the United States – namely, that nature is no longer restricted to the privileged few, but available to all.

In India, still dominantly a nation of villages, environmentalism has emerged at a relatively early stage in the industrial process. Nature-based conflicts, it must be pointed out once again, are at the root of the environmental movement in countries such as India. These conflicts have their root in a lopsided, iniquitous and environmentally destructive process of development in independent India. They are played out against a backdrop of visible ecological degradation, the drying up of springs, the decimation of forests, the erosion of the land. The sheer immediacy of resource shortages means that direct action has been, from the beginning, a vital component of environmental action. Techniques of direct action often rely on traditional networks of organisation, the village and the tribe, and traditional forms of protest, the *dharna* and the *bhook hartal*.

Northern environmentalism, in contrast, relies rather more heavily on the 'social movement organisation' – such as the Sierra Club or the Friends of the Earth – with its own cadre, leadership and properly audited sources of funds. This organisation then draws on the methods of redressal available in what are, after all, more complete democracies – methods such as the court case, the lobbying of legislators and ministers, the exposure on television or in the newspaper. But the experience of recent years somewhat qualifies this contrast between militant protest in the one sphere and lobbying and litigation in the other. Indian environmentalists (as with the KPL case) are turning increasingly to the courts as a supplement to popular protest, while in America, radicals disaffected by the gentle, incremental lobbying of mainstream groups have taken to direct action – the spiking of trees, for example – to protect threatened wilderness.

In both the North and the South, however, environmentalism has been, in good measure, a response to the failure of politicians to mobilize effectively on the issue of, as the case may be, the destruction of the wilderness or the dispossession of peasants by a large dam. In India, for instance, the environmental movement has drawn on the struggles of marginal populations – hill peasants, tribal communities, fishermen, people displaced by construction of dams – neglected by the existing political

parties. And as a 'new social movement', environmentalism in the North emerged, in the first instance, outside the party process. Some environmentalists considered themselves as neither left nor right, representing a constituency that was anti-class or, more accurately, post-class.²⁷ However, over time the environmental constituency became part of the democratic process, sometimes through the formation of Green parties that fight, and even occasionally win, elections.

Origins and political styles notwithstanding, the two varieties of environmentalism perhaps differ most markedly in their ideologies. The environmentalism of the poor originates as a clash over productive resources: a third kind of class conflict, so to speak, but one with deep ecological implications. Red on the outside, but green on the inside. In Southern movements, issues of ecology are often interlinked with questions of human rights, ethnicity and distributive justice. These struggles, of peasants, tribals and so on, are in a sense deeply conservative (in the best sense of the word), refusing to exchange a world they know, and are in partial control over, for an uncertain and insecure future. They are a defence of the locality and the local community against the nation. At the same time, the sharper edge to environmental conflict, and its close connections to subsistence and survival, have also prompted a thoroughgoing critique of consumerism and of uncontrolled economic development.

In contrast, the wilderness movement in the North originates outside the production process. It is in this respect more of a single-issue movement, calling for a change in attitudes (towards the natural world) rather than a change in systems of production or distribution. Especially in the United States, environmentalism has, by and large, run parallel to the consumer society without questioning its socio-ecological basis, its enormous dependence on the lands, peoples and resources of other parts of the globe.²⁸ It is absorbed not so much with relations within human society, as with relations between humans and other species. Here the claims of national sovereignty are challenged not from the vantage point of the locality, but from the perspective of the biosphere as a whole. This is a movement whose self-perception is that of a vanguard, moving from an 'ethical present' where we are concerned only with nation, region and race to an 'ethical future' where our moral development moves from a concern with plants and animals to ecosystems and the planet itself.²⁹

In the preceding paragraphs, I have sketched a broad-brush comparison between two movements, in two different parts of the world, each carrying the prefix 'environmental'. One must, of course, qualify this picture by acknowledging the diversity of ideologies and of forms of action within each of these two trends. In the United States, anti-pollution struggles form a tradition of environmental action which has a different focus from the 'wilderness crusade'. Such, for instance, is the movement for environmental

justice in the United States, the struggles of low-class, often black communities against the incinerators and toxic waste dumps that, by accident and frequently by design, come to be sited near them (and away from affluent neighbourhoods). One American commentator, Ruth Rosen, has nicely captured the contrast between the environmental justice movement and the wilderness lovers. 'At best', she writes, 'the large, mainstream environmental groups focus on the health of the planet – the wilderness, forests and oceans that cannot protect themselves. In contrast, the movement for environmental justice, led by the poor, is not concerned with overabundance, but with the environmental hazards and social and economic inequalities that ravage their communities.'³⁰

Likewise, the Northern wilderness crusade has its representatives in the Third World, who spearhead the constitution of vast areas as national parks and sanctuaries, strictly protected from 'human interference'. Southern lovers of the wilderness come typically from patrician backgrounds, and have shown little regard for the fate of the human communities who, after parkland is designated as 'protected', are abruptly displaced without compensation from territory that they have lived on for generations and come to regard as their own.³¹

These caveats notwithstanding, there remains, on the whole, a clear distinction, in terms of origins and forms of articulation, between how environmental action characteristically expresses itself in the North and in the South. Take these two episodes of protest, one from California, the other from central India, the last illustrations of this chapter.

In May 1979, a young American environmentalist, Mark Dubois, chained himself to a boulder in the Stanislaus river in California. The canyon where he lay formed part of the reservoir of the New Melones dam, whose construction Dubois and his organisation, Friends of the River, had long but unsuccessfully opposed. In October 1978, the Army Corps of Engineers had completed the dam, and the following April it closed the floodgates. The level of the reservoir started to rise, and it appeared as if the campaign to 'Save the Stanislaus' had failed. But then, in an act of rare heroism, Mark Dubois went into the waters and chained himself to a rock. He chose a hidden spot, and only one friend knew of the location.³²

Fourteen years later, an uncannily similar strategy of protest was threatened against another dam, on another river and on another continent. In August 1993, with the onset of the Indian monsoon, the vast reservoir of the Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada river began filling up to capacity. It now seemed that the decade-long Narmada Bachao Andolan had irrevocably lost its fight. But the leader of the movement, Medha Patkar, decided to drown herself in the waters. Patkar announced her decision to walk into the river on 6 August, with a group of colleagues, but at a place and time not to be disclosed. Fearing detention by the police, Patkar

disappeared into the countryside weeks before the appointed date.

I dare say Medha Patkar had not heard of Mark Dubois, but the parallels in their chosen forms of protest are striking indeed. Both formed part of ongoing, popular movements against large dams. It was only when the movement seemed to have failed that Patkar and Dubois decided to throw the last card in their pack, offering their lives to stop the dam. Notably, in both cases the political system was alert (or open) enough not to allow the environmentalists to make this supreme sacrifice. In Stanislaus, the Corps of Engineers stopped filling the reservoir, and sent search parties by air and on land to find and rescue Dubois. In the Narmada valley, Patkar and her band were found and prevailed upon to withdraw their *samarpan dal* (martyrs squad), in return for which the Government of India promised a fresh, independent review of the Sardar Sarovar project.

While the strategies of direct action might have been superficially similar, their underlying motivations were not. Mark Dubois and his colleagues were striving, above all, to save the Stanislaus canyon as one of the last remaining examples of the unspoilt Californian wilderness. As Dubois wrote to the Colonel of the Corps of Engineers prior to entering the river: 'All the life of this canyon, its wealth of archaeological and historical roots to our past, and its unique geological grandeur are enough reasons to protect this canyon *just for itself*. But in addition, all the spiritual values with which this canyon has filled tens of thousands of folks should prohibit us from committing the unconscionable act of wiping this place off the face of the earth'.³³

In contrast, Patkar and her colleagues hoped not only to save the Narmada river itself, but also (and more crucially) the tens of thousands of peasants to be displaced by the dam being built on the river. When completed the Sardar Sarovar project will submerge a total of 245 villages, with an estimated total population of 66,675 people, most of whom are tribals and poor peasants.³⁴ True, the dam will also inundate old-growth forests and historic sites, but it will most emphatically of all destroy the living culture of the human communities who live by the Narmada river. It is thus that the struggle of Patkar and her associates becomes – as they put it in a message written on the 42nd anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's martyrdom – a move 'towards our ultimate goal of [a] socially just and ecologically sustainable model of development'.³⁵

The Stanislaus/Narmada or Dubois/Patkar comparison illustrates a more fundamental difference between two varieties of environmentalism. The action of Mark Dubois, heroic though it undoubtedly was, was quite in line with the dominant thrust of the environmental movement in the North towards the protection of pristine, unspoilt nature: a reservoir of biological diversity and enormous aesthetic appeal which serves as an ideal (if temporary) haven from the urban workaday world. In protecting the wild,

it asserts, we are both acknowledging an ethical responsibility towards other species and enriching the spiritual side of our own existence. In contrast, the action of Medha Patkar was consistent with the dominant thrust of the environmental movement in India, which strongly highlights the questions of production and distribution within human society. It is impossible to say, with regard to India, what Jurgen Habermas has claimed of the European green movement: namely, that it is sparked not 'by problems of distribution, but by concern for the grammar of forms of life'.³⁶ 'No Humanity without Nature!', the epitaph of the Northern environmentalist, is here answered by the equally compelling slogan 'No Nature without Social Justice!'³⁷