

Assignment 5

Environment and Politics

Zubair Abid

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Question: How is ‘culture’ mobilized by environmental campaigns? Use the example of *at least* TWO environmental campaigns to explain the nature of ‘culture’ that is invoked by environmental campaigns, and the specific manner(s) in which such mobilizations occur. Can different ‘cultures’ be mobilized by environmental campaigns? If so, what are the implications of these differences?

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Introduction

At the basis of most “culture heals all” movements one can find the Standard Environmental Narrative (SEN) in action. The idea that “things were good, they got worse” is persistent across a lot of reading of history. The reading isn’t hard to come up with. You already have Giddens going “Industrialism + Capitalism = Ecological Disaster”, and we’re obviously headed towards that conclusion in the current climate, so any moment in time before the onset of the Industrial Revolution (as exercised in each state) will be better on a purely ecological basis. It may not be sustainable with current populations/living standards,

however. Most of these appear to require lifestyle changes to work. And it does seem to work, but at that cost.

How is 'culture' mobilized by environmental campaigns?

To answer this, we first need a look at what exactly is defined here as "culture" - and then, on to a broad overview of how said culture is mobilized by environmental campaigns. We shall be using examples from class for a more detailed insight into the matter.

Defining culture in this context

The definition of culture - as employed by proponents of such movements that claim to encompass an environmental goal - is often a rather narrow subsection of traditions and practices championed by a particular class or a community, often the dominant one in a geographic location. It requires subservience to the specific philosophy advocated by that class. This comes at the cost of other ideals, which may include ones governing modern conceptions of development, lifestyle, and sometimes governance.

Now, we consider that the growth of said "culture" is enabled by the annexation of those outside of it - the existence of an "other"¹. What that means is that there is always an external entity to take down, always a demon to overcome, "always a Ravana". It may be the Government with its Dams. It could be the entirety of "western industrialism". It may choose to target the family in the village belonging to a community known for eating meat. This is a detail that finds its expression once we consider the process of actually mobilising culture, through environmental means.

What does it mean to use environmental campaigns to 'mobilize culture'?

The phrase does not refer to using environmental campaigns to promote specific aspects of cultural importance, such as backing a river conservation project when talking of the Ganga but ignoring all other rivers everywhere else. It is related, however. It can be used to kickstart the mobilization. The mobilization of culture through environmental campaigns refers specifically to the rewriting of the entire environmental agenda in cultural terms - redefining terminology to reflect the ideals of culture over environment, prioritizing the goals of the culture of the goals of environmental movements. Environmental goals continue to exist, but they are subsumed by the cultural ones.

¹ As we shall see later in this essay, cultures by our definition (particularly pre-scientific ones) run on the basis of a belief system, in which everyone has some degree of faith in those superiorly placed in the ranks. Decrees issued by those highest in the ranks *must* be correct - the belief system relies on this. To think otherwise is a weakening of the culture. A persistently followed cultural system must not lose believers. So, as often happens, if things do not go according to prayer, then it was not the decree or its source that was wrong, but some person or community that disobeyed it/does not consider itself subservient to the culture, and they must be annihilated by or brought under the fold of "those more fortunate".

This idea is based loosely on the case for historically global statelessness as highlighted by James Scott in his book "The Art of Not Being Governed". Yes, that is the source of almost every one of my theories in this course so far.

Defining a detailed theoretical framework for said mobilization

The shift of an environmental campaign into a cultural one is not in any way a sudden affair. It begins small - perhaps as apologists of a cultural hegemony dipping their toes into environmental concerns with genuine concern. They advocate for alternative solutions to problems; maybe it is worth looking back into history for examples of sustainable existence? This would work for proponents of pre-industrial approaches, the agrarians or primitivists. As environmentalists embrace their contribution with wider arms, it makes sense for them to adopt the terminology of the contributor to try and gain a wider base amongst a nonchalant public. Cultural terminology is adopted for the environmental cause. More and more cultural proponents adopt the environmental cause.

Most importantly, the environmental front is used to draw people into the cultural movement - normalising what may otherwise be seen as unacceptable by actors. As Mukul Sharma notes in a specific case study of the Tehri Dam,

“In effect, certain metaphors and myths acted as Trojan horses, through which communal politics entered and re-entered green politics. For the anti-dam forces, and particularly for Bahuguna, the politics of anti-dam became a "normal" collaborative relationship between what is "factual", "environmental", "natural" and "sustainable", and what is "religious", "emotional", "national", and "Hindu".”²

The Trojan horse has now introduced a conflation of the goals of both movements. It's an easy path from here. Better elaborated by Sharma (in another piece discussing the Vrindavan Conservation Project:

“(increased introduction of) processes of religious revivalism in environmental politics, through which particular religious symbols and places become embedded with the idea and practice of environment in particular cultural settings, which in turn become allied with a sectarian Hindu politics.”³

Conflation of goals allows for the cultural narrative to overtake and subsume environmental concerns rather easily, as the intersection of concerns now makes up the mainstream of the movement.

Examples of cultural mobilization via environmental means

Presentation of theory is not sufficient for the argument, and for clarity we shall refer to two cases considered by Mukul Sharma in his book “Green and Saffron”. It will be beneficial to view these cases from differing viewpoints - one, from the perspective of environmentalism and a wider exertion of moral authority, and the other, a narrative of how environmental causes can be hijacked to strengthen a larger, possibly controversial narrative.

² Sharma, M. (2009). Passages from Nature to Nationalism: Sunderlal Bahuguna and Tehri Dam Opposition in Garhwal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(8), 37.

³ Sharma, M. (2010). The Vrindavan Conservation Project. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(36), 59–66.

The case of Moral Authority: Anna Hazare and Ralegan Siddhi

A brief introduction and background

Anna Hazare first comes into the limelight due to his work on his hometown in Ralegan Siddhi - a small village in an often drought-stricken part of Maharashtra, described as having problems of “large scale migration, ill health, low productivity and a flourishing business in the illegal distilling of alcohol, resulting into violence especially against women”⁴. Starting in 1975, he is known for having converted the town into a ‘model’ one, providing a pathway other places in the country are encouraged to follow to get similar results of self-sustainability aligned with the Gandhian vision.

Some background to the area can be offered through some factors that affect the region, namely:⁵

- Nativism and regionalism in Maharashtrian culture and politics: There is a strong presence of a Maharashtrian Cultural Identity, which has in contemporary India become a focal point for community and identity. Shivaji in particular is celebrated, and there is a strong sense of disdain expressed against any “outsiders”.
- Structure and nature of caste and class: Marathas form the dominant caste and class in villages⁶.
- Agrarian economy and local environmentalism: As Sharma points out, “It is partially possible to explain Maharashtra's distinct culture on the basis of cultural ecology. The region witnessed a flowering of its culture when the environment was congenial, and the quality of life deteriorated when conditions were adverse.”

The role of ‘Moral Authority’ and its requirements

When examining how exactly an individual reorganised social life in a village to enable such a transformation, we find one crucial discovery - in Hazare’s case, the element that he uses to drive this change is one of “moral authority”, that requires a unified ideological system across the entire village, exercisable only “due to a large degree of consent and conservatism”⁵. His success, as others have reported, comes from convincing the village at large to abandon their old habits and practices and take on new ones that have foundation in a unified ideology, often a rather conservative one.

Where does ‘moral authority’ fit into this? Existing belief systems of the area enable the word of an influentially placed person to be held paramount. This word can then be used as the

⁴ A successful case of participatory watershed management at Ralegan Siddhi Village in district Ahmadnagar, Maharastra, India*. (n.d.). Retrieved April 19, 2020, from <http://www.fao.org/3/X5669E/x5669e06.htm>

⁵ Sharma, M. (2006). The Making of Moral Authority: Anna Hazare and Watershed Management Programme in Ralegan Siddhi. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(20), 1981.

⁶ Lele, J. (1981). Introduction. In *Elite Pluralism and Class Rule: Political development in Maharashtra, India* (pp. 31-35). Reference taken from Sharma, M. (2006). The Making of Moral Authority: Anna Hazare and Watershed Management Programme in Ralegan Siddhi. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(20), 1981-1988.

singular common ground for moral values and opinions, which in shape can affect governance structures, and perspectives of the people. Sharma goes on to highlight the relation to environmental issues by saying:

“[the persons exercising moral authority] have a great bearing on the means to be applied and the goals to be achieved. Here they work through a central figure, who strives for social unity.

Environmental issues can provide a basis to evolve a common consensus, due to their sheer intensity and appeal in a given situation, and in the process even become hegemonic.”⁵

The key point to note with an ideological basis determined by central moral authority is that it leaves no room for dissent. Requiring universal acceptance, it narrows thought into the specific bucket defined by it, at the cost of all others. Alternative ideations of matters have no place for discussion in this environment, be they better or worse. It is by definition, a very conservative basis.

The role of Moral Authority in expression of certain forces

“Any political theory and practice, built on this framework, can open the possibilities of a strengthening of the conservative forces”⁵

Extending on the idea of a necessarily unified ideological basis, we consider the role it has in wider societal construction. We have already discussed how specific cultural practices are necessarily enforced when exercising moral authority to get something done, due to the nature of its unified philosophy. We have also spoken of how in regions of Maharashtra the dominant class/caste is the Marathas. The existence of a ‘dominant class’ is universal across most places, in fact. Therefore, it makes sense that when an exercise of Moral Authority is wiping out all philosophy apart from its own, the dominant conservative narrative of the region gets pushed, trampling over all other dissent.

Observed often, and specifically in the case of Anna Hazare, is that the ideology of a movement is not centered around a single feature. Alongside enforced vegetarianism and a ban on liquor, there is also a call for more community, increased self-reliance, efforts at conservation movements, and so on.

“... though the developmental and the environmental works form the core of its ideological structures, it includes other issues as well. At times it provides a different scale of activities to its audience, but eventually reinforces its principal ideological framework.”

The end of Hazare’s movement is an “Adarsh Gaon”. The means to that include environmental conservation. That is not all the means are. They also include enforced vegetarianism, flogging people who consume alcohol, the upliftment of women, reduction of untouchability, removal of elections for local governance, among others. It is a multi-faceted movement run through the moral authority of one man’s vision that happens to include environmental concern. It is not the “end” that’s being achieved.

Consequences of the impositions in this specific case

Moving beyond the glitzy results of an “environmental success story”, it helps to examine Ralegan Siddhi from other perspectives. Is the model applicable to other places in the

country? Is the example a perfect one from our existing views on democratic processes and rights and justices?

We have already spoken of the ideological limitations enforced for a successful execution of such a model. The limitation does not allow for a diversity in ideas - the basis set down by right of moral authority is divine, for lack of a better word. Reports have spoken of the “democratic processes involved in decision making”⁷, but we are already in a situation without elections, without contrary opinions allowed outside of a narrow scope of morals. On top of that, there are extrajudicial measures like flogging actively in place for violators of the adarsh vision set forth by the head of the entire movement.

“Not only is this authority deeply rooted in the dominant socio-political tradition of the region, it is often blind to many basic and universal issues of rights, democracy justice and freedom of expression.”⁸

Ralegan Siddhi may be a “success”, but it is unlikely to be a lasting one. A movement based on the absolute authority of a ‘superior’ mortal figure is doomed for failure without a conduit for the conveyance and discussion of ideas in a democratic process; it is more than likely to end up manifested as religious fervour over lost ideals and half-forgotten heroes.

The movement from Nature to Nationalism: the Tehri Dam

The other narrative to explore here is that of transforming an environmental cause from what is into a larger nationalist narrative. Where Anna Hazare’s movement in Ralegan Siddhi was based entirely on on a cultural change from the get go, where environment was a part of it from the start which happened to get highlighted, this is more an example of a movement that begins entirely with an environmental agenda but slowly switches to a more nationalistic one. Because it is centred around the river Ganga, considered holy in traditional Hindu culture.

Background to the Tehri Dam project

Protests against the Tehri dam project have existed since the late 1970s. There is a sustained ecological discourse around it. Discussions around the cost-benefit analysis, the economical viability of the project. People have raised the concern of building a dam on geologically unsound plates. Others have spoken on the issues of displacing the several thousands of families due to the catchment area of the dam. Concerns around the possibilities of floods in case of failures or cracks, potentially leading to a massive crisis.

But the Tehri dam does not get all the attention it does due to the ecological narrative around it. It is known for being a massive planned dam on the river Ganga.

⁷ *A successful case of participatory watershed management at Ralegan Siddhi Village in district Ahmadnagar, Maharastra, India**. (n.d.). Retrieved April 19, 2020, from <http://www.fao.org/3/X5669E/x5669e06.htm>

⁸ Sharma, M. (2006). Conclusion. The Making of Moral Authority: Anna Hazare and Watershed Management Programme in Ralegan Siddhi. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(20), 1988.

Probably one of the most influential figures in the movement is Sunderlal Bahuguna. A leading founder of the Chipko movement, he is known for making opposition to Tehri dam his life goal. His protest was two-pronged: On the one hand, he opposed the commodification of nature; on the other, the 'cultural and religious importance of the [river Ganga] to Hindus'.

Getting the Hindu Mainstream involved in an environmental movement

Aesthetic importance has always been a major consideration in the framework of environmental conservation. It is the environmentalism of "pretty birds and tigers", still wildly popular around the world, even in light of humanitarian approaches to the problem. What that means is the call for preservation of natural order, in the case of the river Ganga, finds itself an ally in those calling for the preservation of the river Ganga due to the religious and cultural significance it holds to them.

"In environmental politics, traditional values and ancient beliefs abound ... There are holy lands and rivers, sacred groves and forests in the vocabulary of environmentalism. In effect, this environmentalism moves at will through a vast cultural treasure-house, its shelves loaded with numerous beliefs and practices of the past. It is the element of choice, which distinguishes the green from the saffron."⁹

The environmental movement adopted the terminology of the cultural one. Referring to the cause for preservation as not only ecologically beneficial, but culturally too, for the people of the state. It highlighted the role of the "holy mother Ganga", and not just the river Ganga, in the everyday person's supposed day-to-day life. Sharma puts it as "By invoking certain metaphors, emotions and faiths, and reaching out to particular religious sections and practices, the environmentalists at crucial junctures came close to the politics of conservative Hindu forces, and co-opted their ideas and values."⁹ It was an increased participation in the environmental movement, due to support from another cause with a wider reach and similar goals - at least for the moment. For the anti-dam cultural forces, it became a normal, collaborative relationship between the factual, environmental, and sustainable, with the religious, emotional, and Hindu. "The bond uniting the environmental and religious-political concerns now [made] up the mainstream of the movement. Its targeted call is to arouse the Hindus for a greater cause"⁹

Executing the Cultural Takeover

The terminology of culture is already in place. The mainstream of the movement is made up of the combination of environmental and religious-political actors. All the movement needs for a full-fledged cultural mobilization is a nudge.

For the Tehri dam, that nudge was provided by the Viswa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the RSS. Seizing the opportunity, they painted the dam in a particularly "anti-Hindu" light, as a

⁹ Sharma, M. (2009). Passages from Nature to Nationalism: Sunderlal Bahuguna and Tehri Dam Opposition in Garhwal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(8), 35–42.

scheme cracked by enemies of the culture attempting to constrain mother Ganga. Changes in terminology was important, too - "pollution" could now mean cultural pollution, the existence of outsiders in the community. Purity, defined in cultural terms, was now the basis of cleanliness, environmental cleanliness but a subset of such.

The methodology is observed in successful effect when the movement moves to taking on popular stereotypes.

"Sample the story narrated by Bahuguna at one of his evening sermons. The environmentalist said Muslim emperor Aurangzeb refused water to his dying father, but "we Hindus" even offer water to the dead. The analogy by this "Gandhian" stunned two local Muslim women who silently walked out of the meeting even as the audience, including some VHP activists, burst into an applause."⁹

"Tehri dam is being constructed to imprison the Ganga forever. This is an organised conspiracy to demolish our religion and culture. We demolished the Babri mosque. Now we have to get ready to demolish the Tehri dam"⁹

In conclusion of the matter, Ashok Singhal's words on the matter sum up the point of this section: "I am here not to talk about the cost-benefit of the project. I am talking about Gangatva. Gangatva is Hindutva. Hindutva is Rashtratva."⁹

Can different 'cultures' be mobilized by environmental campaigns?

The circumstances surrounding the mobilization of culture in environmental campaigns has a group of specific qualities. In all cases, the culture engaged is one shared by the majority of people, if in somewhat latent forms. It allows for easier appreciation of the past; one might consider futile an exercise to make the average European appreciate serfdom to be the way to go. It requires, most often, a non-technologist view of conservation that enables people to attempt at "going forward by looking back [at their history]".

There are differences in the cultures evoked through these movements. The cases of Ralegan Siddhi and Tehri, for instance. Where the former was the promotion of a "gandhian philosophy" - hindu, caste based, village centric, with less outward discrimination of lower castes, and based on maratha pride, Tehri is a more Hindu nationalistic movement - less village centric, and more about the preservation and growth of Hindutva. It may center around the same religion, but the goals are different.

What does that imply?

Each of these movements has required a strong leader who can drive people towards their particular chosen ideal. It's an individual's choice. And while a leader can exercise control over thousands, even millions, it is not possible for an individual ruler to command the attention of billions without any dissent. An environmental mobilization of culture requires multiple people trying to get people to choose their individual pathways. They will be at odds with one another. There will be conflict.