

The Indian media's response to global warming

by Veena Gokhale

The subject of this talk should have been the Indian media's response to global warming. But since global warming is not viewed as a major issue by the Indian media, government or environmentalists, I decided to broaden the scope of this speech and talk about the Indian media's response to environmental issues in general.

INDIA'S OTHER PRIORITIES

It is instructive that global warming, rightly viewed in the West as a threat that warrants immediate intervention, should figure so marginally in the Indian psyche. To put it one way, environmentalism in India is still earthbound, we haven't got anywhere near the stratosphere as yet. The environment, in the Indian context, is all about survival and environmental issues are closely linked to developmental issues. The majority of the population still depends on biomass for their immediate survival needs - food, fuel and livelihood. It has been estimated that a typical rural household in India spends up to ten hours per day fetching fuel, fodder and water. And even pregnant women work 14 to 16 hours every day.

Ironically, it is often development, or a certain model of development, in the shape of mining or modern irrigation practices that involve building big dams, deforestation, a dependence on chemical fertilizers and pesticides, that is causing the damage, displacing the very poor and the voiceless, pushing them further down the development ladder. As a lopsided model of development encroaches upon the already scarce resources of the rural poor, these ecological refugees are fleeing to overburdened cities and adding to the chaos.

To give you some examples:

Satellite data confirms that India is losing 1.3 million hectares of forest every year, nearly eight times the annual rate put out officially by the forest department.

Large dams are India's most controversial environmental issue, best exemplified by the Narmada Valley Project, aptly described as India's greatest planned ecological disaster. The 3,000 major and minor dams built under the project will submerge 248 villages, 13,744 hectares of forest land, 11,318 hectares of agricultural land and displace over a 100,000 people. The estimated 50,000 hectares of land needed to resettle those ousted is simply not available. The half-hearted compensation measures offered to the displaced has stalled a previously approved World Bank loan for the project. A detailed cost-benefit analysis undertaken by Indian environmentalists shows that the

meagre benefits from the project in no way justifies the enormous inputs. Yet the government is going ahead with the project for political reasons.

India's urban population, the fourth largest in the world, will be the largest by the turn of the century. By that time, 75 percent of the population of Bombay, India's commercial capital, will be living in slums. The wide use of banned pesticides, highpesticide residues in food, and industries that flaunt safety and anti-pollution rules, are some of the sources of environment-related health problems in India.

The most horrifying industrial accident was the Bhopal gas disaster in 1984 which killed 10,000, disabled 86,000 and exposed 200,000 to the lethal gas. According to government figures, 50 people die in Bhopal every month from gas-related causes. The most shocking part of the tragedy is the paltry compensation given to the victims by Union Carbide.

INDIAN GOVERNMENT A HINDRANCE

The most disheartening factor about the crushing ecological problems facing India is the ineffectual, and at times even destructive, role played by the government. It is easy to make the overwhelming population statistics the scapegoat for all ills. These figures seem to stump the most knowledgeable and progressive of critics. The real culprits, however, are administrative corruption, faulty planning and a lack of political will.

According to a 1983 study by the Food and Agricultural Organization on the "Potential Population Supporting Capacities of Lands in the Developing World," assuming high to intermediate agricultural input, India can feed its teeming millions. But, while soil and water management should top the government's list of priorities, they are given scant attention in the planning process.

The many non-governmental organizations working with the rural and urban poor have often managed to evolve inexpensive solutions to some of the problems these people face, but the government is reluctant to take a decentralized, grassroots approach to development, preferring to believe in the mega model of development. It keeps reiterating that the trickle-down effect will come into play someday, when it very clearly isn't going to.

ENVIRONMENT AND THE INDIAN MEDIA

Where does the Indian media fit into this elemental struggle? Encouragingly, the Indian press has played a key role in educating people about environmental issues. In India, the environmental journalist is not infrequently the environmental activist. It must also be noted that the press is the only free medium in India, television and radio being government controlled. Unfortunately, it can only address the literate minority of Indians, but is nevertheless an influential medium.

The growth of the environmental movement in India is synonymous with the growth of ecology-conscious journalism. Both can be roughly traced back to the world famous Chipko movement in the early 1970s when villagers in

remote northern villages clung to the trees in their locality in order to protect them from being indiscriminately felled by timber merchants. Equally well-known is the struggle to save the Silent Valley in Kerala in South India, in the late 70s where the Kerala Rashtrya Sahitya Parishad led a protest against, and prevented, a hydroelectric project from coming up in this rare, rich, tropical rain forest.

It was the 1980s that saw a tremendous growth in environmental activism and environmental journalism. The Silent Valley protest had raised some valid questions about big dams: development for whom and at whose cost? It had also exposed the link between environment, development and politics which the press explored further in the last decade.

"The State of India's Environment 1984-85," an intelligent and comprehensive survey of the Indian environment, was a unique document put together by activists, journalists and academics. It not only brought together ecology-conscious individuals and groups but also gave both the movement and the journalism a context and a perspective.

The Bhopal gas tragedy provided another milestone for the Indian environmental movement and journalism, albeit an unfortunate one. First, it raised pertinent questions about where industries should be located. And second, whether the company which had the accident, or the government under which it occurred, should be held accountable in case of a mishap. (I would like to digress here to say that environmental protection laws do exist in India but are toothless, given the endemic corruption inherent in the system.)

The immediate fallout of the Bhopal disaster was the enforcement of certain safety provisions and the shelving of some questionable projects. More importantly, it brought the issue of industrial pollution into people's drawing rooms. Gas leaks are now routinely reported by a vigilant and better informed public.

The next landmark, and the most visible protest to date, was the anti-Narmada movement which once again reiterated the all-important question: whose development and at whose cost? Newspapers devoted a lot of space to the issue and it goes to their credit that they printed pro-Narmada articles as well.

DANGERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEDIA

One danger of the journalist as activist is that his/her arguments can get partisan. But I believe that the benefits of the journalist as activist far outnumber the disadvantages. Yet emotions must be held in check while writing about the environment, or the end product will get dismissed as humbug. Many Indians still subscribe to the dream of a super-industrialized India and they need to be educated gently about how megaprojects often make the rich richer and the poor poorer. I, for one, feel that nothing works as well as the human interest angle and there is always a people story inside a larger environmental story.

Television, with its vast reach and tremendous popularity has not played a very active role in environmental education. There have been some good programmes but they have been sporadic, getting on the air more by chance than design. It is too much to expect a critique of the government's environmental policy on this statecontrolled medium. Activists could probably get involved with the production and dissemination of environmental programmes, as one of them has successfully done in the past. By the way, a feature film about deforestation made in Assamese won a national award sometime back.

The general feeling in the press is that journalism has managed to conscientize the readers about the environment. What we need now is to provide greater analysis and most importantly, alternatives to the problems posed by development. The hitch is that even the environmentalists don't have too many solutions, though they know what they don't want. The press could certainly act as a catalyst here.

The current 'make it short and snappy' style of writing sometimes fails to give enough space and depth to a technically involved subject like the environment. And we don't get to see as many editorials on the environment as there should be.

On the positive side, younger journalists appear to have an instinctive sympathy for environmental issues. But editors are not always encouraging. A national newspaper left out a report on an important anti-Narmada rally in 1988 saying that there was no space for it. At times, journalists are denied access to information about developmental projects by the government. There is very little specialized information on the environment available at short notice and a definite need exists to establish ecology-oriented resource centres. Given that environment is a complex and technical subject, at least some of the reporting on it tends to be superficial. But on the whole, I feel that the Indian environmental or developmental journalist is fairly knowledgeable.

GLOBAL WARMING ISSUE

And what of global warming? I first heard about it some two years ago and read about it in some detail about a year back in the science section of a newspaper. Essentially, in India, we are still at the information dissemination stage about global warming. Professor S.R. Kamat, a member of the Sub-Committee on Energy of the Environmental and Health Committee of the World Health Organization, wrote an article about it in a popular Sunday newspaper, some six months ago. He gave special attention to the ecological impact of rising water levels, caused by global warming, on India's long shoreline.

Unfortunately, Indian environmentalists seem preoccupied with other things. Some even dismiss global warming as a 'western', elite issue. There is certainly a need to bring global warming upfront to the government, the media and the people. India's contribution to global warming has already been computed by some international environmental protection agencies.

There is a need to do more research in this direction and put global warming on the agenda of the Indian planning agencies.

I would like to end by reading a poem by Daya Pawar, a well-known Indian poet who happens to belong to the scheduled caste:

As I build this dam,
I bury my life
The dawn breaks
There is no flour in the grinding stone

I collect yesterday's husk for today's meal
The sun rises
And my spirit sinks
Hiding my baby under a basket
And hiding my tears
I go to build the dam

The dam is ready
It feeds their sugarcane fields
Making the crop lush and juicy
But I walk miles through the forest
In search of a drop of drinking water

I water the vegetation with drops of my sweat
As dry leaves fall and fill my parched yard.