

# From Protest to Policy: The Evolving Role of Environmental NGOs in India's Governance Landscape

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## ABSTRACT

Environmental Non Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) in India have developed new ways to participate in environmental governance due to the increasing pressure from the market based economy introduced with the economic reforms. In response to this growing demand for development and related resource extraction, ENGOS evolved from a protest base approach to conducting research, litigating, participating in policymaking processes, and supporting local community initiatives. This study highlights the diversity of roles that ENGOS perform. These roles include functioning as a connection between the state and local communities, providing accountability mechanisms for government agencies, and providing input into policy making processes. An additional critical function performed by ENGOS is using public interest litigation to shape environmental law and provide stronger constitutional protections for environmental rights. Despite the continued challenges faced by ENGOS such as limited financial resources, and increasing regulatory pressures; they remain a necessary actor in responding to emerging environmental problems and challenges.

**Keywords:** Climate Change, ENGOS, Environmental Governance, Environmental Justice, Civil Society, Policy Reform, Social Movements.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Indian government's opening of its economy in 1991 unleashed waves of fast paced change in the country. Cities expanded, industries grew, and infrastructure projects multiplied at a pace the country had never seen before. While there was no doubt that these changes brought huge economic benefits, the quiet costs of pollution to the nation's rivers, loss of forests and disappearance of wild habitat for animal species occurred quietly. Many of these changes were not abstract to many of the nations communities who lived near natural resources, they were part of their daily lives. It was within this rapidly changing world that Environmental Non Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) in India began to transform their own identities. What once was primarily a protesting force (raising voice against dams, mining, deforestation etc.) has developed into much more sophisticated organizations. Today these organizations are doing far more than opposing adversely affected development projects. They are developing evidence to support their positions, engaging with policy makers, taking issues to court when necessary and working directly with community members on the ground. In many ways ENGO's are no longer simply reacting to change they are now proactively shaping it. Over time, ENGO's have established themselves as mediators between ordinary citizens and the government apparatus. They are translating citizen's concerns into policy discussions and bringing technical and legal expertise back to the communities. As such, they are playing a central role in the national process of making decisions regarding India's environment. Most particularly since liberalization, the presence of ENGOS has moved from the periphery to the centre of how India works with its environment.

### Evolution of Environmental NGOs in India

ENGOS are evolving and developing at different stages. There have been three distinct phases in the development of ENGOS. During the initial period of development, most ENGOS acted as strong opposition to large-scale development projects. These projects were perceived as threats to the natural world and local communities. A defining example of the type of resistance movement during this time is the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The Narmada Bachao Andolan utilized grassroots resistance combined with legal action in the Supreme Court; additionally, there was an attempt to draw international attention to the problems of displacement and environmental justice. Movements similar to the

Narmada Bachao Andolan include Chipko, Appiko, Tehri, and Chilika. Often these types of movements received support from organizations including Kalpavriksh and Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). As a result, ENGOs primarily relied upon protests, court cases, and global advocacy networks. They did help to create new policy tools; however, their role was predominantly reactive.

By the middle of the decade of the 2000s, the way in which ENGOs interacted with the state had begun to evolve. While many organizations continued to exist on the periphery of the government, some organizations began working directly with the government and other interested parties. A good example of how collaborative relationships developed between ENGOs and government agencies during this period is the creation of the Forest Rights Act of 2006. Groups like Campaign for Survival and Dignity, ATREE, and Kalpavriksh worked closely to combine conservation interests with tribal rights (Chakraborty, 2016). In addition to supporting specific legislation, ENGOs helped to develop broad policy initiatives including the National Environment Policy of 2006, the National Green Tribunal of 2010, and the National Action Plan on Climate Change of 2008. Organizations such as TERI and WWF-India provided technical input to these efforts representing a point in time when ENGOs were increasingly viewed as being involved in governance processes rather than simply being critical of them (Ganguly, 2015).

In recent years, the ability of ENGOs to operate has been constrained significantly due to increased regulation. For instance, foreign contribution regulations have limited funding opportunities for organizations such as Greenpeace India and Navdanya. Consequently, many ENGOs have altered their operational strategy. More emphasis is placed on creating research reports, conducting policy analyses, and engaging in digital advocacy. Although regulatory constraints limit the use of direct action protests and demonstrations by ENGOs, they continue to utilize social media campaigns and provide comprehensive reviews of proposed policies and legislation to shape public opinion and decision making related to policy directions. The role of ENGOs may not be as visible in terms of street activism; however, their contributions continue to impact society through providing information based evidence, participating in legal proceedings regarding environmental issues, and strategically advocating for various causes.

### **ENGOs and Environmental Governance**

ENGOs represent a new force that is transforming how environmental governance works locally, nationally and globally. Beyond being an advocate for public interests, ENGOs can also monitor government policies and actions; provide access to knowledge about environmental conditions and promote inclusive decision-making processes with regard to environmental issues. In contrast to all other types of organizations, ENGOs function most frequently as bridges or intermediaries connecting societies with their respective governments, which enhances participation and accountability when it comes to making environmentally related decisions. When environmental challenges transcend national boundaries, ENGO engagement provides alternative governance frameworks that promote transparency, inclusiveness, and cross border cooperation. As environmental challenges are cross border in nature, the involvement of ENGOs provides alternative governance frameworks which encourage transparency, inclusivity, and cross border cooperation (KecK & Kathryn, 2014). Besides ENGO advocacy is conditioned on the ability of local citizens to participate in the advocacy and the vulnerability of the state to external pressure (Vega, Raul, & Murdie, 2022).

ENGOs have taken up many of the concerns facing the world today, including climate change, air pollution, ozone layer depletion, waste management, biodiversity conservation, sustainable land use, energy issues, degradation of natural ecosystems etc. ENGOs influence the governmental policies that govern environment, help the people to get participated in environmental decision making, monitoring environmental compliance, and educate people the need of sustainability. ENGOs also serve as watchdogs (Abbot & Lee, 2024), knowledge brokers, and innovators in environmental management. Their greatest strength is that they can mobilize the general public, turn complicated scientific knowledge into a simple narrative, and apply ethical pressure to both the federal/state/ local government and corporate bodies.

ENGOs utilize Public Interest Litigation (PIL) to make sure corporations adhere to environmental regulations. The Right to Information Act (RTI) of 2005 has given ENGOs the power to request any information from the government with regards to environmental regulations. There have been many laws and policy enacted by the Indian government to protect the environment. Some of those laws include; The Indian Fisheries Act (1897), The Indian Forest Act (1927), The Water Prevention & Control of Pollution Act (1974), The Forest Conservation Act (1980), The Air Prevention & Control Act (1981), The Environment Protection Act (1986), The Hazardous Waste Management & handling Rules (1989), The Ozone Depleting Substance Regulation & control rules 2000, Biological Diversity Act, 2002, The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, The National Green Tribunal (NGT) act, 2010, Solid Waste management Rules (2016) and E-waste (management) rules (2022) etc. However, even though there are all of these laws corporations and factories continue to break them for their own gain (Kaur, 2025).

### **ENGOs and Government Initiatives for Environmental Sustainability**

India's pursuit of environmentally sustainable development is being pursued through multiple avenues of action at both the macro and micro levels, including regulation (EIA Notification, 2006); broad national policy initiatives (National Action Plan on Climate Change, 2008); and large-scale public education campaigns (Swachh Bharat); as well as

longer-term ecologically focused programs (National Afforestation Program). While these initiatives collectively comprise what appears to be an overarching strategy to achieve environmental sustainability in India, the ultimate impact of many of these initiatives will depend upon how effectively they can be implemented, which is where ENGOs play an essential role. For example, organizations such as the CSE have challenged the legitimacy of environmental clearances by critically examining the adequacy of the environmental impact assessments conducted on high-profile projects, such as the POSCO project, thereby increasing accountability throughout the process (Vardhan, Nandy, & Khalid, 2025; Ramesh, 2024). Similarly, within the realm of climate policy, ENGOs, such as TERI, perform functions beyond mere research by translating complex climate objectives established under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) into practical initiatives to support missions such as Solar and Green India Missions and to assist in bridging the gap between the intentions outlined in environmental and climate-related policy and the eventual realization of those policies (Kaur et al., 2022). Likewise, ENGOs such as Sulabh International also demonstrate that the successful implementation of the Swachh Bharat Mission extends far beyond simply constructing toilets; that behavioural and societal changes must occur first in order for effective habituation to take place; and that this occurs most readily through sustained community engagement (Singh & Sorensen, 2025). Finally, in terms of forest conservation, ENGOs work closely with local communities to ensure that afforestation is achieved not only through the planting of trees, but through local ownership and continued maintenance of those forests (Kumar, 2019). Overall, these various examples indicate that while government policies outline the overall direction for achieving environmental sustainability, it is the continuous grassroots level presence of ENGOs that ultimately determine if governments' environmental goals are successfully realized.

**ENGOs in Transition**

ENGOs in India are no longer simply voice protests against government and corporate actions that harm the environment, today ENGOs have become critical components in influencing the decision making process at all levels of governance and implementing those decisions. The grassroots resistance movement known as Chipko Movement helped to protect trees with physical action that ultimately caused the state to begin rethinking forest management policies and the importance of community led conservation. In addition, movements such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad went beyond fighting proposed large dams to influence government decisions and eventually develop national environmental protection policy. Additionally, organizations such as the CSE and TERI not only review existing policies but also provide research and data driven analysis and assist in developing new solutions related to issues such as air quality, renewable energy, and climate planning. As a result of these contributions, CSE and TERI play an important role in influencing government policymakers themselves (Krishnan, 2018). While, it is true that changes in India have occurred both in report writing and policy development environments, it is also true that changes have been made in people's daily lives. For example, organizations such as Sulabh International have demonstrated that significant progress can be achieved by changing daily habits and attitudes towards issues of sanitation, because even if there is adequate infrastructure, successful sanitation practices depend upon individual behaviour.

Additionally, throughout the country there are many ENGOs working cooperatively with local communities to help manage their natural resources by utilizing joint approaches to forest management and other forms of collaborative resource use. These types of collaborative approaches ensure that conservation efforts are based on reality found at the local level and are not simply top down directed. Moreover, many ENGOs have also learned to utilize the legal system to pressure institutions into accountability and enforce compliance with existing environmental laws through various mechanisms including PIL, which has proven useful in cases where the government or private entities fail to adequately implement environmental laws.

**ENGOs in India**

ENGOs	Year of Establishment	Key Contribution / Success
Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad	1962	Grassroots activism influencing environmental policy in Kerala
WWF-India	1969	Conservation and climate awareness campaigns
Sulabh International	1970	Sanitation reforms and behavioural change initiatives
Chipko Movement	1973	Community led Forest conservation
The Energy and Resources Institute	1974	Climate policy and renewable energy advocacy
Kalpavriksh	1979	Biodiversity conservation and participatory governance
Centre for Science and Environment	1980	Air pollution control and EIA policy reforms
Development Alternatives	1982	Sustainable livelihoods and green technologies
Centre for Environment Education	1984	Environmental education

Narmada Bachao Andolan	1985	Rights based advocacy on displacement and environment
Indian Council for Enviro Legal Action (ICELA)	1986	Landmark environmental PILs
Wildlife Trust of India	1998	Wildlife conservation and habitat protection
Greenpeace India	2001	Anti coal and renewable energy campaigns
Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment (LIFE)	2008	Environmental litigation and advocacy
Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW)	2010	Policy research on energy and climate
Climate Collective Foundation	2020	Climate startup and policy ecosystem support
Youth for Environment Education and Development Foundation (YEED)	2023	Youth engagement in climate action

Source: Author's Compilation

### Landmark Court Cases and Advocacy Wins

Although the majority of the legal reforms in environmental domain are due to the efforts of NGOs, many have used PIL as an avenue to reach courts in their pursuit of environmental reform. As a result of this, ENGOs helped to expand the scope of Article 21, which includes the Right to Life, to include the Right to Clean and Healthy Environment. They also advocated for the court's application of environmental law principles including the Precautionary Principle and the Polluter Pays Principle. The first significant development in the use of PIL for environmental purposes was when the Rural Litigation & Entitlement Kendra filed a complaint against destructive mining activities in Uttar Pradesh (1985 - 1987).

The first of what would be significant developments regarding the use of PIL for environmental purposes occurred when the Rural Litigation & Entitlement Kendra filed a complaint against destructive limestone mining operations in the Doon Valley (1985 - 1987). This development provided precedent for courts to intervene in matters concerning ecological balance. Following this initial victory, environmental reform became much more prevalent. Between 1986 and 2002 M.C. Mehta, working in conjunction with larger civil society movements, had numerous successful uses of PIL to advocate for environmental causes. The Oleum Gas Leak Case (1986) created the concept of Absolute Liability thereby holding all industries liable for any damage caused to the environment; The Ganga Pollution Case (1988) required industries to decrease the amount of pollutants released into the river; The Taj Trapezium Case (1997) implemented policies to protect the Taj Mahal from air pollution generated by surrounding industrial facilities; and The Delhi Vehicular Pollution Case (1998-2002) promoted a transition to cleaner burning natural gas (CNG) fuels within public transportation.

Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India (1996) case was another successful example of the use of PIL for environmental causes. The organization worked with the court to establish the formal recognition of both the Precautionary Approach (the prevention of potential harm) and the Polluter Pays Principle (polluters pay for damages). Similarly, Indian Council for Enviro Legal Action v. Union of India (1996) case ensured that companies that damaged the environment were held liable for the costs associated with cleaning up and compensating those affected. In Samatha v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1997), Samatha assisted tribal communities who opposed private mining on their land and succeeded, thereby establishing the relationship between environmental protection and social justice. However, the outcome of PIL has not always resulted in complete successes. For example, in Narmada Bachao Andolan v. Union of India (2000), despite highlighting severe environmental and displacement concerns, the Court ruled in favour of proceeding with the dam project. Conversely, there were successes related to wildlife conservation. For example, in Centre for Environmental Law v. Union of India (2013), WWF-India played a key role in obtaining protective measures for Asiatic Lions. Additionally, in the NGT Era, examples such as Almitra Patel (2000s), demonstrated how NGO-driven litigation can influence policy-making related to solid waste management.

### Challenges Faced by Environmental NGOs

ENGOs in India have been playing an important role in protecting natural resources and addressing issues of environmental justice as seen through efforts such as the Chipko Movement and Narmada Bachao Andolan. In addition to these social movements there have also been various organizations that have played key roles such as the CSE and Green Peace India. However, due to both institutional restrictions and political pressures, many of the ENGOs functions continue to be altered. With stricter regulatory mechanisms including those related to the FCRA making it less predictable for the flow of international aid has affected their ability to operate independently and sustainably (Bornstein & Sharma, 2016). Furthermore, ENGOs challenging large-scale development initiatives such as mining in Niyamgiri (Odisha) experience considerable opposition from corporate and political stakeholders who in many occasions labelled them obstructive to development leading to increased polarisation (Randeria, 2003). Many of the ENGOs experience internal challenges such as insufficient financial backing, lack of skilled staff, limited technology support and poor communication among different organizations within the sector. As a result of all these factors, as well

as because of lack of cooperation across different sectors competing for very limited funding opportunities the power base of these organizations continues to decrease. In addition to lack of cooperation across the sector there is little engagement from local citizens, particularly in lower income areas, where livelihood concerns rank higher than broader social or environmental interests limiting larger scale mobilization.

### Future Strategies of Environmental NGOs in India

ENGOS in India will be less able to simply focus on confrontation as they were previously able to; instead, their effectiveness and relevance will be based upon their level of adaptability to an evolving political and institutional landscape. An important aspect of the shift toward greater reliance on “know-how” and “knowledge”, rather than solely relying on “confrontation” is the increasing importance placed on providing credible and empirically based information. This includes collecting and disseminating reliable data regarding environmental issues at both national, regional and local levels, and contributing to research that informs policy development. As environmental challenges continue to grow in complexity and interconnectedness (such as climate change and loss of biodiversity), ENGOS are increasingly assuming roles as interpreters of scientific data for decision makers, while remaining rooted in the lived experience of impacted communities. Additionally, it is expected that ENGOS will continue to develop strong connections between environmental protection and economic opportunities, and will strengthen relationships among other organizations. Isolating themselves from others has often resulted in reduced influence; therefore, increased coordination among organizations will result in a stronger collective voice in policy discussions.

Another factor that is expected to shape the future direction of ENGOS is the continued expansion of digital technologies. For example, the recent high level of involvement of social media during the debate surrounding the Draft Environment Impact Assessment notification 2020 illustrated that digital platforms can increase awareness, engage younger populations, and allow for ongoing discussion of environmental issues regardless of limitations imposed by other forms of protest. In addition to the potential benefits provided by digital technologies, ENGOS will need to begin developing strategies to maintain their financial viability. They should consider using resources available domestically, including local philanthropy, community contributions, or strategic partnerships to ensure that they can continue to function despite potential disruptions resulting from regulatory actions. It is possible that environmental NGOs will need to develop closer relationships with governmental agencies in those instances where collaborative work would facilitate translation of policy into action. Ultimately, the successful functioning of ENGOS will also depend on maintaining public confidence. Maintaining credibility will require transparency regarding their work processes and practices, as well as their ability to respond to both local needs and broader environmental concerns.

### CONCLUSION

ENGOS in India represent a significant transition from protest to an active role in influencing policy, working within legal systems and at the grassroots. While early environmental movements such as Chipko and Narmada Bachao Andolan helped raise awareness about the costs of unregulated development; these efforts have evolved and today many are using formalized mechanisms such as providing research, participating in policy discussions and utilizing legal options to advocate for stronger environmental regulations. Their value lies in bringing local environmental issues into larger national policy debates, questioning policy decisions where they see fit and acting as a link between development demands and environmental sustainability.

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