

Media Activism as a Catalyst for Environmental Awareness and Sustainability

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Abstract: Media activism has played a crucial role in highlighting key issues such as communal riots, female foeticide, rape and sexual abuse in recent times. It rightfully requires recognition for consistently bringing social, cultural, and political concerns to the forefront of public discourse. Without the proactive efforts of the media, many of these issues might have remained unnoticed or unaddressed by the wider public. However, there have also been instances where the media has disproportionately focused on less significant matters, sensationalized trivial topics, or reported without adequate fact-checking. The present study explores and analyzes case studies of media activism in the context of environmental sustainability. It utilizes credible and relevant secondary sources from the public domain, such as newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, social media posts, and other materials.

The findings of the study aim to shed light on the media strategies and techniques employed, as well as the impact of information dissemination on the intended audience. Ultimately, the study seeks to assess the effectiveness of media in fostering awareness and contributing positively to societal growth.

Keywords: *Media Activism, Environment, Sustainability, Effect on Audiences, Case studies*

1. Introduction

The media plays a crucial role in raising awareness about a wide range of social, political, and economic issues, influencing large audiences across society. By disseminating information, gathering diverse opinions, and shaping public attitudes, media acts as a constructive force. Its contributions have been especially notable in covering natural disasters, exposing corruption through investigative journalism, and highlighting various socio-economic and political matters. Media holds the power to spotlight important issues at critical moments, using its influence either to foster positive change or, at times, to create societal unrest. In this way, media significantly shapes societal values and perspectives.

The Indian media landscape has undergone substantial transformation since the early 1990s, following the advent of globalisation, privatisation, and liberalisation. These changes have led to the rise of global media conglomerates, an increase in domestic private players, the spread of cable television, and the introduction of 24x7 news channels. Additionally, the digital revolution has given birth to numerous digital media platforms, further altering the role and impact of media in society.

Media activism is evident through various activities such as publishing news online, organizing campaigns related to media and communication policies, conducting audio investigations, creating videos, and sharing information about protests. This has been made possible by the wide range of mass media platforms available today, including print, film, radio, television, and digital media. These platforms are actively used to address social, political, and economic issues that are important

to the public. Media activism is driven by a diverse group of individuals, including activists, journalists, politicians, and members of civil society. When public debates arise within civil society, they are often echoed and amplified by the media. Campaigns on development issues such as environmental protection, gender-based violence, pollution, and anti-corruption movements like Jan Lokpal have received significant public support, reflecting society's concern for these matters. Such citizen-led initiatives are vital for developing countries like India, as they help guide society in a positive and constructive direction.

Media activism in the context of environmental sustainability would involve understanding how the media can actively work towards promoting environmental protection and sustainable practices. Media activism can play an instrumental role in creating awareness about environmental challenges such as climate change, pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity loss by reaching a large audience. Media can actively disseminate information about environmental issues, their causes and consequences, and potential solutions. This can educate the public and foster a better understanding of environmental sustainability. Furthermore, it may provide platforms for different perspectives on environmental issues, including those of experts, activists, affected communities, and policymakers. This can contribute to a more informed public discourse. It can encourage public participation in environmental protection efforts. It can "promote the right thing at the right point of time" in the context of environmental urgency.

In essence, media activism in the context of environmental sustainability involves the proactive use of media platforms and tools to advocate for environmental protection, promote sustainable development, and mobilise public support for environmental causes. This goes beyond simply reporting on environmental issues and involves a more deliberate and engaged role in driving positive environmental change.

2. Review of Literature

Environmental sustainability has become an increasingly urgent global concern, driving the rise of media activism as a tool for raising awareness, influencing public opinion, and advocating for policy changes. This review examines the existing literature on media activism's role in addressing critical environmental issues

Media activism has been central to shaping public discourse on climate change by raising Awareness and shifting attitudes. For instance, documentary films like "An Inconvenient Truth" have been credited with significantly raising public awareness of climate change and its potential consequences. Social media campaigns, such as the #FridaysForFuture movement, have mobilized young people and amplified their voices in the climate debate (Igini, 2022). Deforestation, driven by agriculture, logging, and mining, poses a significant threat to biodiversity, climate stability, and indigenous communities. Investigative journalism and citizen reporting have been instrumental in exposing illegal logging operations, land grabbing, and human rights abuses associated with deforestation.

Documentaries and online platforms have provided visual evidence of the destruction of forests and the displacement of communities, galvanizing public support for forest conservation. Some of the case studies may be Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion campaigns gained traction through social media virality (Wahlström et al., 2019) and The Chipko Movement's legacy was revived digitally to raise awareness about deforestation in Uttarakhand (Mehta, 2020). In addition to this the traditional media has played a significant role in promoting environmental activism. It has been observed that mainstream media often underrepresents or misrepresents climate change due to political or economic constraints (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007). There has been notable growing

involvement of NGOs in leveraging mainstream media to shape environmental discourse. NGOs enhance environmental communication by raising awareness, translating scientific data, conducting field research, and using media platforms to mobilize support and ensure credible, accessible information for the public (Hansen, 2011).

3. Methodology

This research relies on secondary sources such as newspapers, magazines, blogs, and articles for data collection. The findings and discussion are developed through a qualitative analysis of selected case studies focused on media activism and environmental issues. By examining well-known instances of environmental activism, the study highlights how these efforts have significantly raised public awareness about critical concerns. In-depth analysis of these cases has provided valuable insights into the strategies, planning, execution, and dissemination of information, as well as the overall impact on public perception and engagement

4. Media Activism and Environment Sustainability: Concept

The term "activism" emerged in the mid-1970s, referring to the capacity to take action and influence or reshape history. "Media activism" specifically describes collective communication efforts aimed at challenging the existing order, including mainstream media institutions. These forms of media are often minimally funded or operate without funding, resulting in shorter life spans compared to media backed by commercial, governmental, or religious interests. Media activism represents a distinct "tribe" within the broader landscape of nano media (also called alternative media and citizens' media). Their functions may spill over at times within the operation of established media, especially in times of social turbulence and crisis. (Downing, 2018). Some scholars, such as Alexander Kluge, describe activism as "the immediate on-the-spot struggle," rooted in the historic pursuit of new rights and the protection of existing ones. Activism, in this sense, often manifests through strikes, protests, demonstrations, non-violent civil disobedience, consumer boycotts, and other actions aimed at driving social change (Cammaerts, 2013).

Brian Martin defines activism as taking action in support of a cause, often extending beyond conventional or routine activities. Such actions can include door-to-door canvassing, organizing rallies, fasting, holding public meetings, or operating alternative radio stations. The causes championed through activism may range from advocating for women's rights and promoting world peace to opposing the construction of factories and more (Martin, 2007).

In simple terms media activism involves using media and communication technologies to support social and political movements. It encompasses activities such as publishing news online, creating investigative videos and audio content, spreading information about protests, and organizing campaigns to influence media policies. Grassroots activists often rely on media activism to share information overlooked or censored by mainstream outlets, and to promote politically motivated causes. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube play a significant role due to their interactive features and wide reach, enabling rapid information dissemination and event organization without centralized leadership. Additionally, cultural jamming—subverting mainstream media messages for protest—is another form of media activism that leverages existing media channels for alternative purposes. (TheAudiopedia, 2017).

Environmental sustainability focuses on maintaining ecological balance. For almost two thousand years, human activities have contributed to the carbonization of our planet, playing a significant role in global climate change. For example, The Brazilian government launched the Green Passport campaign in 2008, partnering with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Brazil's
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Ministries of Environment and Tourism, the French Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development, and other collaborators. The campaign aimed to encourage travelers and tourists to adopt more sustainable behaviors during their trips. The Green Passport itself is a document that offers guidance to tourists on how to make their vacations eco-friendlier. Alongside this, a website was created to help travelers easily find sustainably managed hotels, eco-conscious food options, and other environmentally friendly services (InternationalInstituteForSustainableDevelopment, 2012).

In 2014, Greenpeace released a YouTube video aimed at severing the partnership between Lego and the oil company Shell, which was criticized for its environmental damage. The video quickly caught the attention of major outlets like The Guardian and the Columbia Journalism Review, helping it reaching over 6 million views in a short time. This widespread exposure sparked extensive mainstream media coverage and huge public pressure. As a result, Lego ended its partnership with Shell. Greenpeace later employed similar online activism tactics in a campaign targeting Nestlé. They engaged people to act and protest against Nestlé, for their usage of palm oil from companies (Naskova, 2015).

Global media activism around development has had a direct and indirect impact on Indian media as well. To explore the reach of media activism and development issues in India, several case studies are examined where media activism played a key role in backing environmental movements and launching media-driven campaigns promoting environmental sustainability.

5. Data Interpretation and Analysis

This research study analyzes the role of media activism in promoting environmental sustainability from two perspectives. The first examines case studies of environmental movements that gained momentum with media support, while the second explores media-initiated awareness campaigns aimed at fostering sustainable environmental development.

5.1 Case studies of environmental movement supported by media

The table 1 is analyzed with the perspective of Media Usability, Strategies Used, Public Engagement, Effectiveness of the environment campaign and overall impact. These are discussed below:

Media Usability

The Chipko Movement primarily utilized traditional communication like oral traditions, folk songs, and local newspapers, reflecting limited reach but deep community engagement. Save Silent Valley marked a shift by leveraging print journalism, and later radio and television, bringing the issue to national attention. NBA expanded the media strategy further by involving independent documentaries, international press, and eventually digital platforms, making it one of the first to integrate global outreach into environmental activism. In the digital age, Sterlite and Aarey exemplified the power of social media, using platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to drive public opinion, build narratives, and mobilize support rapidly. They employed hashtags, live updates, and influencer advocacy to great effect, positioning themselves as media-savvy, urban movements.

Table1: Highlights the use of media in prominent environmental movements

Sno	Movement	Year	Issue	Medium	Impact	Outcome
1	Chipko Movement	1970s	Deforestation	Traditional Media	Promoting ecofeminism and	Forest conservation rights

					grassroots resistance, inspiring global movements	
2	Save Silent Valley	1970s	Environment	Initiated with print media, later followed by radio and TV	Journalists and Environmentalist collaboration	Project was scrapped
3	Narmada Bachao Andolan	1980s-2000s	Environmental damage, displacement of the people	Independent film, print, international media, later digital	Initiated debate on sustainable development, and human rights	World Bank withdrawing from the project and influencing the Supreme Court to order a review of the project and implement measures to address resettlement
4	Sterlite Copper Plant Protest (Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu)	2018	Ground Water Pollution	Local media, national television, social media	Active participation by citizens, Activists and Journalists to protect ground water pollution	Tamil Nadu government ordering permanent closure of the Sterlite plant.
5	Aarey Forest Protest (Mumbai)	2019-2023	Influencer advocacy challenged tree-cutting for a metro car shed	Twitter/X, Instagram, web portals, visual campaigns	Celebrities, youth and activists, citizens	Aarey was declared a protected forest in 2022.

Strategies Used

Each movement employed different strategies that reflected its era and context. Chipko used symbolic non-violent resistance, with villagers hugging trees to prevent their felling—a powerful moral and visual statement. Save Silent Valley combined scientific arguments with media engagement, creating a fact-based advocacy model. NBA utilized legal activism, mass mobilizations, and international campaigns, including appeals to global organizations like the World Bank. The Sterlite movement relied on a blend of legal petitions, media exposure, and mass street protests, particularly after state violence sparked national outrage. Aarey demonstrated a modern strategy mix—influencer advocacy, digital storytelling, artistic visuals, online petitions, and legal challenges—showing how environmental resistance can integrate civic, legal, and digital tools.

Public Engagement

Public engagement increased and diversified over time. The Chipko Movement was deeply rooted in local community participation, especially rural women who took a frontline role. Save Silent Valley attracted attention from scientists, students, and journalists, combining technical expertise with public concern. NBA saw extensive grassroots involvement, particularly among tribal communities, while also drawing support from urban intellectuals and international human rights activists. The Sterlite Protest brought together local citizens, youth groups, and journalists who were directly affected by pollution, with participation surging after the tragic police firing incident. Similarly, the Aarey Forest Protest witnessed strong urban, youth-led participation, featuring

weekly citizen protests, petitions, and widespread online involvement, often supported by celebrities and environmental influencers.

Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the environmental movements varied depending on their goals, context, and resistance strategies. The Chipko Movement was highly effective in curbing deforestation in the Himalayan region and directly influenced the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, making it a landmark example of grassroots success. The Save Silent Valley Movement was also notably successful, as it led to the complete cancellation of the hydroelectric project and the declaration of the area as a National Park—an exemplary environmental victory. Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), despite its strong advocacy and widespread attention, achieved only partial success: it forced funding agencies and courts to address resettlement concerns, but ultimately, dam construction proceeded. In contrast, the Sterlite Protest resulted in the permanent closure of the polluting copper plant in Tamil Nadu, showing clear effectiveness in achieving its environmental goal. The Aarey Forest Protest also achieved significant success by halting tree felling and leading to Aarey being declared a protected forest in 2022, though some parts of the metro project remain under review.

Overall Impact

The cumulative impact of these movements on India's environmental discourse and policy landscape has been profound. The Chipko Movement not only preserved forests but became a symbol of ecofeminism and grassroots resistance, inspiring global movements. Save Silent Valley institutionalized environmental impact assessment (EIA) processes and underscored the need for ecological sensitivity in development planning. While NBA did not stop the dam, it raised international awareness of the human cost of large infrastructure projects and redefined the discourse on development versus displacement. The Sterlite Protest set a precedent for urban industrial accountability, proving that community resistance can shut down a major corporation. The Aarey Forest Protest exemplified urban environmentalism in the digital age, bringing attention to the ecological importance of green spaces in cities and empowering young, urban citizens to shape infrastructure decisions.

5.2 Environmental awareness campaigns initiated by media

The campaigns initiated by the media to protect the environment are discussed below:

Save Tigers (1973)

Project Tiger is a significant wildlife conservation initiative launched in India to protect the declining population of tigers. As the number of tigers was rapidly decreasing, the project was initiated in 1973. It was first launched at Jim Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand, with the primary aim of preventing the extinction of the Royal Bengal Tiger. The project now encompasses around fifty national parks and wildlife sanctuaries across the country. Over the years, it has proven to be a success, with the tiger population increasing from about 1,200 in 1973 to nearly 5,000 today. (InsideIndianJungals, 2021). The Project Tiger movement received significant support from Aircel-NDTV through the launch of the "Save the Tiger" campaign in collaboration with WWF-India. This initiative garnered widespread attention, inspiring many individuals and celebrities to participate. Prominent figures such as MS Dhoni and Amitabh Bachchan actively supported the campaign and took part in its promotional activities. Vikram Chandra, a well-known anchor from NDTV, hosted a special program that featured tiger experts and key stakeholders, bringing valuable insights to the public. In addition to televised programs, various media campaigns contributed to a strong and positive public response. The series of special features on tiger conservation delivered a powerful

message—affirming that media still plays a vital role in addressing developmental and environmental issues, while upholding its social responsibility.

Furthermore, social networking sites played a commendable role in amplifying the campaign's reach. Many platforms created dedicated blogs, which were actively supported by readers through encouraging comments and engagement. NDTV's initiative not only raised widespread awareness about tiger conservation but also motivated the public to share their opinions and support, making it a truly participatory movement (Sharma, 2012). Thus, the democratic participation of audiences has made the NDTV campaign successful.

Greenathon(2008)

The Greenathon campaign was initiated by NDTV-Toyota in April 2008. The primary objective of the campaign was to raise awareness about the importance of preserving greenery and protecting wildlife. NDTV's initiative highlighted the media's role in fulfilling its social responsibility and contributing to the development of society. This campaign took the form of a 24-hour movement, bringing together celebrities and individuals from diverse sectors—including sports, corporate, government, and Bollywood—to unite and advocate for the cause.

Through this campaign an attempt was made to the purchase solar lights to donate the villagers by raising fund (Ranjan, n.d.). Greenathon was a fundraising event which encouraged people to donate money to support TERI's 'Lighting a Billion Lives' initiative. The event aimed at providing solar power to the villages that were without electricity (Exchange4Media, 2012). In the first Greenathon held in 2009, around 55 villages were electrified. The initiative expanded steadily—156 villages were lit in 2010, about 500 villages in the third Greenathon (2011), and approximately 508 villages in the fourth edition (2014). Over the span of four years, the campaign successfully brought light to more than 1,000 villages. By 2014, NDTV intensified the Greenathon campaign, enhancing public engagement through print media, outdoor advertising, and on-ground visits. These concerted efforts significantly increased public participation and awareness, reflecting the campaign's growing impact on society (Singh S. V., 2012). Thus, in a media led campaign there was a democratic participation of people for a right cause.

#RightToBreathe (2020)

In 2015, the Help Delhi Breathe initiative was launched to tackle the problem of air pollution in Delhi. The campaign specifically engaged the city's educated middle and upper classes, chosen for their technological proficiency and strong presence on the internet, smartphones, and social media platforms. The movement brought together local community groups, small business owners, start-up leaders, and activists focused on air quality issues, resulting in broad-based and active public participation. This collective involvement highlights the relevance of the emancipatory media theory, as it empowered citizens to take part in shaping the discourse and actions around air pollution. Additionally, schools and mothers' groups played a key role in expanding the campaign's reach by disseminating messages through Facebook posts, demonstrating how social media facilitated democratic participation and community networking for this cause (Kumar, 2018).

By involving diverse segments of society, the Help Delhi Breathe campaign aimed to spark a sustained movement that would drive behavioral change and influence policy on air pollution in Delhi. To achieve this, Help Delhi Breathe mobilized the Clean Air Coalition and promoted the use of the #MyRightToBreathe hashtag, creating a unified platform for citizen advocacy. Subsequently, Mothers in Delhi played a significant role in the campaign against air pollution, contributing to the expansion of the movement. 'My Right to Breathe' (MRTB), a citizen-led initiative, launched the '#DilliDhadakneDo' campaign to combat air pollution and promote public health. As part of their

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efforts, MRTB introduced the Indian Child Activity Recommendations (ICARe)—a structured protocol designed to rationally plan outdoor activities for children, aiming to minimize their exposure to harmful air pollution and safeguard their health (Nigam, 2019).

The movement was organized by citizens to urge political parties to address the pressing issue of air pollution with greater seriousness. It launched with a series of events spanning 15 different constituencies throughout Delhi, beginning with a town hall meeting in Karawal Nagar. The core idea behind the "#DilliDhadakneDo" campaign was to empower citizens, giving them a platform to demand accountability from their political candidates and ensure that clean air became a key electoral issue. The message was clear: when citizens vote for clean air, the government must respond. A notable feature of the campaign was the use of electric rickshaws for rallies. These vehicles, integral to Delhi's public transport system, symbolized both green jobs and the city's commitment to clean, sustainable transportation. Their inclusion highlighted the campaign's focus on practical solutions for a healthier, more environmentally friendly Delhi. The role of social media was commendable in this campaign as it helped in increasing the awareness among the people of Delhi (IndiaBloomsNewsService, 2020).

6. Key Findings

- *Chipko Movement* succeeded in shaping conservation law and spreading awareness, though not all forest rights were ensured. It laid the foundational ethos of grassroots resistance and scientific conservation.
- *Save Silent Valley*, *Sterlite Protest*, and *Aarey Forest Protest* each achieved their core objectives: project cancellation, industrial plant closure, and forest protection respectively.
- *Narmada Bachao Andolan* forced policy changes and global attention but couldn't stop the dam. Narmada Bachao Andolan added legal depth and international attention to environmental rights.
- Sterlite and Aarey proved that urban environmentalism, if driven by youth, social media, and legal activism, can force accountability and shift policies—even in complex, politicized projects.
- The media-initiated environment campaigns were limited as per the interest of the media organisations. Such initiatives must be increased to increase awareness among the audience.

7. Challenges in Media Usability

Chipko Movement had limited access to media operated in the rural remote Himalayan areas with no access to broadcast or mainstream media. The movement relied on oral tradition and local print. There was lack of media literacy among villagers which made documentation and amplification difficult. In Save Silent Valley campaign failed to get attention of the national media. The nature of arguments related to biodiversity; ecological balance was hard to communicate in easy language. With respect to Narmada Bachao Andolan the media attention was fragmented as it was a prolonged movement for two decades. In addition, it was a long legal battle and repeated protest led to limited attention of the main stream

In Sterlite Protest Vedanta through corporate PR inference attempted to downplay the environmental issue through paid media narrative. There was local suppression of news which led to media censorship during the early phase of this movement. Besides this, there was also use of social media for circulation of information however, it led to spread of misinformation due to dissemination of unverified content on social media. Lastly, Aarey Forest Protest witnessed the algorithm bias, troll and counter narrative and urban elite bias.

8. Conclusion

Media activism has become a vital force in advancing environmental sustainability by increasing public awareness, questioning prevailing narratives, and pushing for policy reforms. Despite facing numerous obstacles, media activism holds significant potential to influence public opinion, amplify the voices of marginalized communities, and demand accountability from corporations and institutions. In the face of growing environmental crises such as climate change, deforestation, and pollution, the sustained efforts of media activists remain crucial in fostering a more informed, engaged, and sustainable global society.

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