6

The Southern Challenge

There is a widespread belief that environmentalism is a phenomenon peculiar to the rich nations of the North, a product of the move toward 'postmaterialist' values among the populations of North America and Western Europe. In a series of books and essays published over the last twenty years, the political scientist Ronald Inglehart has argued that environmentalism is central to this shift 'from giving top priority to physical sustenance and safety toward heavier emphasis on belonging, self-expression, and the quality of life.' A corollary of this thesis is the claim that poor countries cannot possibly generate environmental movements of their own. Consider these statements by three senior, serious scholars:

> If you look at the countries that are interested in environmentalism, or at the individuals who support environmentalism within each country, one is struck by the extent to which environmentalism is an interest of the upper middle class. Poor countries and poor individuals simply aren't interested. (Lester Thurow, *The Zero-Sum Society*, 1980).
>
> It is no accident that the main support for ecological policies comes from the rich countries and from the comfortable rich and middle classes (except for businessmen, who hope to make money by polluting activity). The poor, multiplying and under-employed, wanted more 'development,' not less. (Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 1994).
>
> Only the maligned Western world has the money and the will to conserve its environment. It is the 'Northern White Empire's' last burden, and may be its last crusade. (Anna Bramwell, *The Fading of the Greens*, 1994).

From this point of view, the expression of environmentalism in countries not previously marked by it is a sign that these societies have finally arrived at the threshold of modernity and affluence. When protests against pollution broke out near Seoul in 1991, the respected British weekly, the *New Scientist*, announced that South Korea had at last 'woken up to the environment.' Likewise, the steady growth of an environmental constituency in Taiwan has been interpreted as a consequence of the clear triumph, within that island nation, of modernity over tradition. The Taiwanese, writes Stevan Harrell, had come to—

> value nature because the city is polluted and noisy, and because nature is more accessible than it was. They go on [excursions on] weekends because their time, as industrial citizens, is structured in regular blocks. . . . There is nothing particularly Chinese about any of this, nor is there anything particularly Western or Westernized. There is something peculiarly modern, the self-critique of the social formation that has allowed all this leisure and luxury.

By equating environmentalism exclusively with affluence, scholars seem to posit an evolutionary sequence—of poor societies becoming prosperous before they can find green movements in their midst. But as Steven Brechin and Willett Kempton note, 'the conventional wisdom—that the citizens of developing countries do not or cannot care about the environment—has been broadly accepted by Western publics and the diplomatic community, with theoretical backing from the postmaterialist thesis but *with little data from those developing countries*.'

The consensus that *Silent Spring* begat the modern environmental movement might be allowed to stand; but the consensus that the societies of the Third World are too poor to be green shall not go undisputed. By bringing in 'data from those developing countries,' this chapter suggests that there does in fact exist a vibrant and growing environmental constituency in societies such as Brazil, India and Thailand, countries far-flung and richly varied among themselves but united nonetheless by the poverty of the masses of their peoples.

THE ENVIRONMENTALISM OF THE POOR

Let me offer five examples of poor peoples' environmentalism, taken from five recognizably less-than-wealthy societies of the globe.

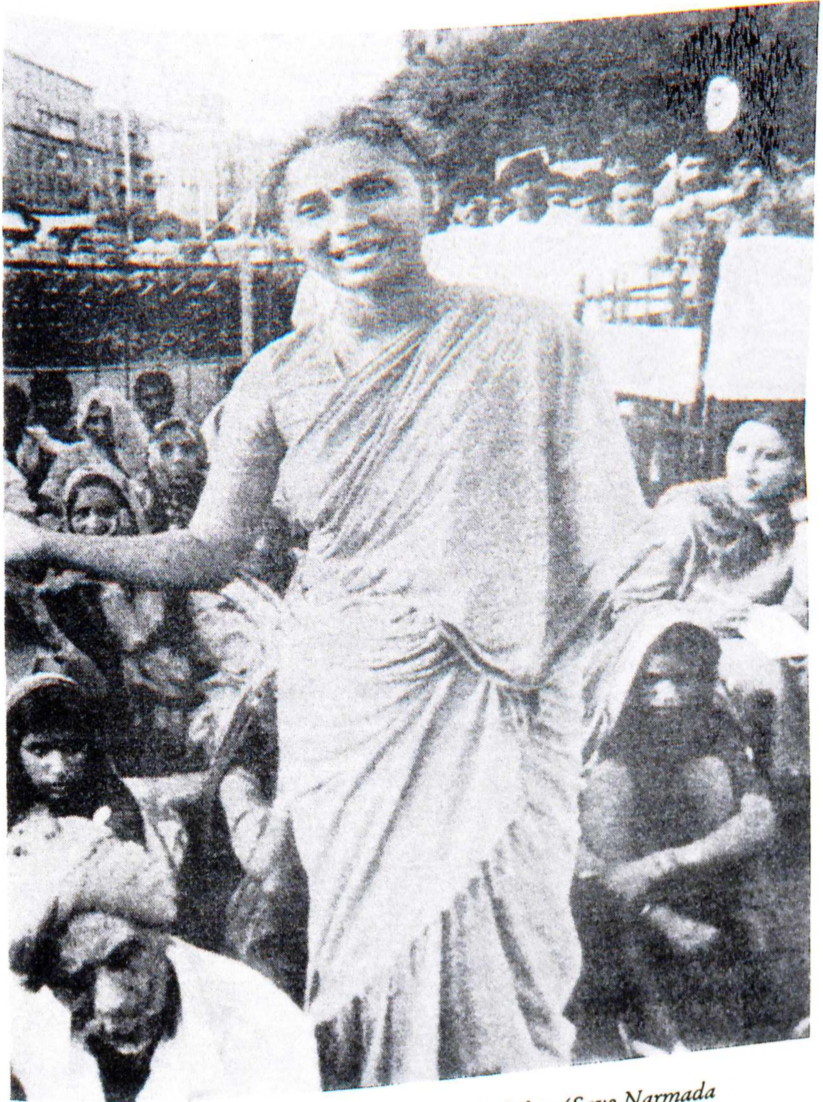
1. The Penan are a tiny community of hunters and farmers who live in the forests of the Malaysian state of Sarawak. They number

less than 7000 individuals, and do not generally seek the limelight. In the late '80s, however, they became major players in a major controversy. For their forest home had been steadily encroached upon by commercial loggers, whose felling activities had fouled their rivers, exposed their soils and destroyed plants and animals which they harvested for food. Beyond this material loss was a deeper loss of meaning, for the Penan have a strong cultural bond with their river and forest landscape. Helped by Bruno Manser, a Swiss artist who then lived with them, the tribe organized blockades and demonstrations to force the chainsaws and their operators back to where they came from. The Penan struggle was taken up and publicized by the respected Penang-based group, Sahabat Alam Malaysia, and by transnational forums such as Greenpeace and the Rainforest Action Network.

2. The Sardar Sarovar dam, being built on the Narmada river in central India, shall stand as a showpiece of Indian economic development. Four hundred and sixty feet high when completed, the dam will provide much-needed irrigation and electricity, but it shall also submerge historic old temples, rich deciduous forests, and at least 250 villages. These potential 'oustees' have come together under the banner of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement), which is led by a forty-year-old woman, Medha Patkar. In their bid to stop dam construction, Patkar and her colleagues have fasted outside provincial legislatures, camped outside the Indian prime minister's house in New Delhi, and walked through the Narmada valley to raise awareness of the predicament of the to-be-displaced villagers.

3. Pressed to earn foreign exchange, the state forest department of Thailand initiated, in the late '70s, the conversion of acres and acres of natural forests into monocultural plantations of eucalyptus. The department hopes to thus plant up 60,000 square kilometres by the year 2020, to provide eucalyptus chips for paper mills, mostly owned by Japanese companies. While bureaucrats in Bangkok contemplated a rising intake of yen, peasants in the forests began opposition to the plantations. They believed that their rice fields would be affected by the proximity of the water-guzzling and soil-depleting Australian tree; they also mourned the loss of the mixed forests from which they harvested fodder, fuel, fruit and medicines. Peasant protesters are mobilized by Buddhist priests, who lead delegations to public officials and also conduct 'ordination' ceremonies to prevent natural forests being turned into artificial ones.

4. On November 10, 1995, the military dictatorship of Nigeria hung nine dissenters, the most prominent of whom was the poet and



Medha Patkar, leader of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Movement), addressing a public meeting in Mumbai in 1992.

SOURCE Frontline *magazine.*

playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa. Their crime had been to draw attention to the impact on their Ogoni tribe of oil drilling by the Anglo-Dutch conglomerate, Royal Shell. Shell had been drawing some 25,000 barrels a day from the Ogoni territories. The federal government benefited from oil exploration in the form of rising revenues, but the Ogoni lost a great deal. They remained without schools, or hospitals; thirty-five years of drilling had instead led to death and devastation: 'a blighted countryside, an atmosphere full of . . . carbon monoxide and hydrocarbon; a land in which wildlife is unknown; a land of polluted streams and creeks, a land which is, in every sense of the term, an ecological disaster.' The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, founded by Saro-Wiwa in 1991, had intensified the public opposition to Shell and its military backers. The generals in Lagos responded with threats, intimidation, arrest, and finally by judicially murdering Saro-Wiwa and his colleagues.

5. My final illustration is one of environmental reconstruction rather than protest. This is Kenya's Green Belt Movement, founded by Waangari Matthai, an anatomist schooled at the University of Kansas who became her country's first woman professor. In 1977 Matthai threw up her university position to motivate other, less-privileged women to protect and improve their environment. Starting with a mere seven saplings planted on June 5, 1977 (World Environment Day), the movement had by 1992 distributed 7,000,000 saplings, planted and cared for by groups of village women spread over twenty-two districts of Kenya. The Green Belt Movement, writes the journalist Fred Pearce, has 'arguably done more to stall the expansion of deserts and the destruction of soils in Africa than its big brother international body down the road, the United Nations Environmental Program [also headquartered in Nairobi] with its grand but largely unsuccessful anti-desertification programs.'

The cases I have chosen are all moderately well known among the environmental community. Medha Patkar was honored with the prestigious Goldman award (endowed by California philanthropists); the Penan have had films about their plight broadcast on British and German television; Saro-Wiwa's death even made it to the front page of the staid *New York Times*. I could certainly have chosen better known examples of the environmentalism of the poor: indeed two such, possibly the most famous of all, are examined later in the chapter. But I could also have chosen lesser-known examples, which number in the hundreds in the countries of the South. These include other movements that oppose commercial logging and industrial monocultures while defending traditional community rights and natural

Waangari Matthai, founder of the Kenyan Green Belt Movement.

SOURCE *Photo by Runar Malkenes, here taken from Fred Pearce,* The Green Warriors *(The Bodley Head).*

forests; other struggles of dam-displaced people who do not wish to make way for expensive and destructive 'mega-projects;' movements of peasants whose crops and pastureland have been destroyed by limestone mines or granite quarries; movements of artisanal fisherfolk directed at modern high-tech trawlers that destroy their livelihood even as they deplete fish stocks; and movements against paper factories by communities living downstream, for whom chemical effluents destroy the beauty of the river as well as their sole source of drinking water. To these struggles against environmental degradation one must add struggles for environmental renewal, the numerous and growing efforts by rural communities in Asia and Africa to better manage their forests, conserve their soil, sustainably harvest their water or use energy-saving devices like improved stoves and biogas plants.

'The environmentalism of the poor' is a convenient umbrella term that I shall use for these varied forms of social action. The Peruvian activist Hugo Blanco has evocatively distinguished this kind of environmentalism from its better known and more closely studied Northern counterpart. At first sight, writes Blanco,

> environmentalists or conservationists are nice, slightly crazy guys whose main purpose in life is to prevent the disappearance of blue whales or pandas. The common people have more important things to think about, for instance how to get their daily bread. Sometimes they are taken to be not so crazy but rather smart guys who, in the guise of protecting endangered species, have formed so-called NGOs to get juicy amounts of dollars from abroad . . . Such views are sometimes true. However, there are in Peru a very large number of people who are environmentalists. Of course, if I tell such people, you are ecologists, they might reply, 'ecologist your mother,' or words to that effect. Let us see, however. Isn't the village of Bambamarca truly environmentalist, which has time and again fought valiantly against the pollution of its water from mining? Are not the town of Ilo and the surrounding villages which are being polluted by the Southern Peru Copper Corporation truly environmentalist? Is not the village of Tambo Grande in Piura environmentalist when it rises like a closed fist and is ready to die in order to prevent strip-mining in its valley? Also, the people of the Mantaro Valley who saw their little sheep die, because of the smoke and waste from La Oroya smelter. And the population of Amazonia, who are totally environmentalist, and die defending their forests against depredation. Also the poor people of Lima are environmentalists, when they complain against the pollution of water in the beaches.
>
> [translated from the Spanish by Juan Martinez Alier]

One can identify some half-a-dozen distinguishing features of the environmentalism of the poor. First and foremost, it combines a concern for the environment with an often more visible concern for social justice. Through much of the Third World, writes David Cleary, 'reality is a seamless web of social and environmental constraints which it makes little sense to atomise into mutually exclusive categories.' Commercial forestry, oil drilling, and large dams all damage the environment, but they also, and to their victims more painfully, constitute a threat to rural livelihoods: by depriving tribals of fuelwood and small game, by destroying the crops of farmers, or by submerging wholesale the lands and homes of villagers who have the misfortune to be placed in their path. The opposition to these interventions is thus as much a defense of livelihood as an 'environmental' movement in the narrow sense of the term. This inseparability of social and environmental concerns is beautifully captured in a petition of December 1990, addressed to the President of Mexico by a community of Nahuatl Indians who were asked to make way for the proposed San Juan dam on the Balsa river:

> Mr President., we publicly and collectively declare our rejection of the San Juan Telecingo Dam because we cannot allow this project to destroy the economy, the historical and cultural heritage, and the natural resources on which [we] depend . . . This project, by flooding our villages and our lands, would cause great losses and hardships to us in every way: we would lose our houses, churches, town halls, roads, irrigation systems and other collective works that we have undertaken with great sacrifice over many years. We would lose the best farmland that we live from; we would lose the pastures that support our livestock; we would lose our orchards and our fruit trees; we would lose the clay deposits and other raw materials we use for our crafts; we would lose our cemetries where our dead are buried, our churches, and the caves, springs and other sacred places where we make our offerings; we would lose, among others, Teopantecuanitlan, a unique archeological site of great importance . . .; we would lose all the natural resources we know and use for our sustenance as taught to us by our ancestors. We would lose so many things that we cannot express them all here because we would never finish this document.
>
> [translated from the Spanish by Catherine Good]

The fact that environmental degradation often intensifies *economic* deprivation explains the moral urgency of these movements of protest. The anthropologist Peter Brosius has seen in the Penan struggle an 'unambiguous statement of the rightness of one's case;' but similarly convinced that right—though not necessarily might—is on their

side are the rural communities who oppose eucalyptus plantations, polluting factories, or soil-exposing mines. There too, a longstanding, *prior* claim to the resource in question—land, water, forests, fish—has been abruptly extinguished by profiteers working in concert with government, which has granted these outsiders oil, mineral or logging concessions. There is then manifest a palpable sense of betrayal, a feeling that the government, *their* government, has let down the poor by taking the side of the rich. For the Penan, notes Brosius, government officials have become 'men who don't know how to pity . . .;' men 'unfeeling about creating such hardship and disregardful of their concerns.'

There is, however, at first the hope that the government will come to see the error of its ways. These struggles thus most often begin by addressing letters and petitions to persons of authority, themselves in a position to bring about remedial action. It is when these pleas are unanswered that protesters turn to more direct forms of confrontation. Unlike in the North, where electronic media and direct mailers are intelligently used to canvass support, the channels of communication in the South rely rather more heavily on 'traditional' networks such as village and tribe, lineage and caste. Once a sufficient number of like-minded people have been gathered together, there unfolds a richly varied repertoire of collective action. In a study of popular environmentalism in India, I was able to identify seven distinct forms of social protest. These were the *dharna* or sit-down strike; the *pradarshan* or massed procession; the *hartal* or general strike (forcing shops to down shutters); the *rasta roko* or transport blockade (by squatting on rail tracks or highways); the *bhook hartal* or hunger fast (conducted at a strategic site, say the office of the dam engineer, and generally by a recognized leader of the movement); the *gherao*, which is to surround an office or official for days on end; and the *jail bharo andolan* or movement to fill jails by the collective breach of a law considered unjust.

Most of these methods were perfected by Mahatma Gandhi in his battles with British colonialism, but of course they have ready equivalents in other peasant cultures. Larry Lohmann, writing of the opposition to eucalyptus in rural Thailand, remarks on how—

> Small-scale farmers are weathering the contempt of bureaucrats and petitioning district officials and cabinet ministers, standing up to assassination threats and arranging strategy meetings with villagers from other areas. They are holding rallies, speaking out at seminars, blocking roads, and marching on government offices, singing songs composed

> for the occasion. Where other means fail and they are well enough organized, they are ripping out eucalyptus seedlings, either surreptitiously or openly in large mobs, chopping down eucalyptus trees, stopping bulldozers and burning nurseries and equipment. At the same time, well aware of the need to seize the environmentalist high ground, many villagers are planting fruit, rubber, and native forest trees to preempt or replace eucalyptus and are explaining to sympathetic journalists the methods they have used to preserve local forest patches for generations.

These protests, singly and collectively, are sometimes underwritten by a powerful indigenous ideology of social justice. Gandhi, for instance, has given Indian environmentalists their most favored techniques of protest as well as a moral vocabulary to oppose the destruction of the village economy by industrialization. Thai peasants, likewise, take recourse to the Buddha and Buddhism to remind their rulers, who publicly profess the same religion, that their policies are a clear violation of the creedal commitment to justice, moderation and harmony with nature. It is notable that the anti-eucalyptus struggle has been led by Buddhist priests, known appositely as *phra nakanuraksa*, or 'ecology monks.' In Latin America, the ideology most conveniently at hand is popular Catholicism and its contemporary variant, 'liberation theology,' which makes clear the mandate of the clergy, and of the church as a whole, to redirect its energies towards the poor. Thus the resisters to the San Juan dam asked parish priests to hold nightly prayer meetings, walked with images of village patron saints to the site of the dam, and also marched to the cathedral in Mexico City in honor of the hallowed Virgin of Guadalupe.

One striking feature of the environmentalism of the poor has been the significant and sometimes determining part played by women. Women have effortlessly assumed leadership roles—as with Medha Patkar or Waangari Matthai, for example—and also contributed more than their fair share to making up the numbers in marches and demonstrations, strikes and fasts. They have been unafraid, in an often brutal political culture, of being harrassed, beaten or jailed. When a Venezuelan feminist writes that in her country 'today all women's groups are environmentalist regardless of whether they know what the environment means,' she could be speaking for women in India or Malaysia, Brazil, Kenya and Mexico.

Among women in the countryside, certainly, there is often a deep awareness of the dependence of human society on a clean and bountiful environment. A tribal woman in the Bastar district of central India, herself active in a forest protection campaign, puts it this way:

'What will happen if there are no forests? *Bhagwan Mahaprabhu* [God] and *Dharti Maata* [Mother Earth] will leave our side, they will leave us and we will die. It is because the earth exists that we are sitting here and talking.' Inspired by such remarks, some feminist scholars posit a near-mystical bond between women and nature, an intrinsic and proto-biological rapport which in their view is denied to men. Other feminists have argued, in my view more plausibly, that the participation of women in environmental movements stems from their closer day-to-day involvement in the use of nature, and additionally from their greater awareness and respect for community cohesion and solidarity. In the divison of labor typical of most peasant, tribal and pastoralist households, it falls on women (and children) to gather fuelwood, collect water, and harvest edible plants. They are thus more easily able to perceive, and more quickly respond to, the drying up of springs or the disappearance of forests. But it is also the case that women, more than men, are inclined to the long view, to sense, for example, that eucalyptus planted for industry might bring in some quick cash today but will undermine their economic security for tom-morow and the day after (see *box*).

A GRASSROOTS 'ECO-FEMINISM'

The response of women in an Andean village to a proposal by male officials to plant eucalyptus:

in the community of Tapuc . . . women vehemently said in Quechua that the transplanted eucalyptus in the parcels of *manay* must be immediately removed. *Manay* is an agricultural zone dedicated to the cultivation of root crops, in turns dictated by the system of sectoral flows, with years of rest in between. The community and individuals of the community exercise control together over the *manay*. Thus, the women, speaking for the community, insisted that these parcels had been inherited from their grandparents to supply root crops, they were not going to feed their children with the eucalyptus leaves. Moreover, where the eucalyptus grows, the soil is impoverished and it does not even grow onions.

Source: Enrique Mayer and Cesar Fonseca, *Comunidad y Producion en el Peru* (Lima 1988), p. 187 (translated by Juan Martinez Alier).

AN INDIA/BRAZIL COMPARISON

I move on now to a comparison of the environmental movement as it has unfolded in two large, complex and vitally important Third World countries. Brazil and India have much in common: their sheer size in

geographical and demographic terms; the cultural diversity of their societies; the deep disparities between rich and poor; the history of ambitious and aggressive programs of state-sponsored industrialization; the appalling ecological and social costs of these programs; and last, the emergence of active environmental constituencies which have challenged the prevailing consensus on what constitutes proper development.

After World War II, politicians in both Brazil and India were in the vanguard of the movement among the poorer nations of the globe that sought to accomplish in a generation what had taken the affluent West centuries to achieve. The intelligentsia—scientists, technologists, civil servants, legislators—manifested an enormous sense of self-importance, viewing themselves as a chosen elite, leading their people out of darkness into light, or from disease-ridden poverty to prosperity. Pride of place was given to mammoth and pharaonic projects—steel mills, big dams, nuclear power plants and the like—which, it was hoped, would generate wealth and instil a sense of pride and self-worth among the public at large. These projects had their costs—thousands of people displaced, millions of hectares of forests felled and dozens of rivers fouled—but they were at first insulated from criticism by the prestige they enjoyed, the promise they held, and above all by the fact that they were initiated by a government which enjoyed a fair degree of popular support. Projects were legitimated by the ideal of national 'sacrifice:' when tribals had to hand over their forest to a paper mill, for example, or when peasants had to flee from the rising waters of a reservoir designed to inundate their lands, they were offered the solace that this often unwilling sacrifice of their livelihood was being made for the greater good of the nation, or more precisely for the happy augmentation of its Gross National Product.

In both the Brazilian and Indian models of development, the public sector was mandated to control the 'commanding heights' of the economy, with private capitalists assigned an important subsidiary role in generating wealth. Both public and private firms were, however, allowed the virtually free use of nature and natural resources: the state providing them timber, water, minerals, electricity, etc. at well below market prices, and also granting them what was, in effect, the right to freely pollute the air and the waters.

In Brazil the process of industrialization was perhaps more callous than in India. For one thing, the youthfulness of the national culture and the existence of an 'untapped frontier' in the form of the Amazon basin prompted a greater optimism about development and an acceleration of the pace at which it was to be carried out. For

another, the country lacked a tradition of dissent such as Gandhism, which in India provided a cautionary voice to temper the impatience of the planners and developers, forcing them to make haste slowly and to take more account of the human costs involved. A vibrant multi-party system and multi-lingual press also gave freer play in India to a variety of voices. In Brazil, by contrast, an already fragile polity was captured in 1964 by a military dictatorship that simply wouldn't tolerate opposition to the highways it built or the licenses it gave on generous terms to industrial firms.

By the late sixties, however, the failures of state-sponsored industrialization lay exposed in both countries. Poverty refused to go away, the fruits of development, such as they were, being garnered by a minority of affluent urbanites and rural landlords. The latter drove cars, watched television, and used refrigerators like their Northern counterparts, while the majority of their countrymen and women continued to live in huts and shanty towns, cooking their meals with fuelwood or kerosene and relying on their own two feet for locomotion. At the same time, nature lay embattled and scarred, subject to levels of environmental degradation that were, in a word, horrific. The social and ecological costs are summed up in the following quotes, both pertaining to Brazil, but both equally true of India. First, some remarks of the sociologist Peter Berger, from his 1974 book *Pyramids of Sacrifice*:

> The overall picture that emerges is that of two nations, one relatively affluent, the other in various degrees of misery. Such a state of affairs, of course, exists in many countries of the Third World. The sheer size of Brazil, however, with its enormous territory and its population of about one hundred million, makes for a particular situation. Using reasonable criteria of differentiation, one may divide this population into about fifteen million in the sector of affluence and eighty-five million in the sector of misery. To see the economic import of these figures, one must focus on the fact that fifteen million is a very large number of people—indeed, it is the population of quite a few important countries with advanced industrial economies. As one commentator put it, Brazil is a Sweden superimposed upon an Indonesia. . . . In this way, the very size of Brazil contributes an additional dimension to the process of polarization. It also contributes a seeming plausibility to the rhetoric of the regime. With a little luck, a visitor may travel all over the country and see nothing but 'Sweden,' with some bits of 'Indonesia' either being absorbed into the former or serving as a colorful backdrop for it.
>
> This is the dry stuff of economics. Behind it lies a world of human pain. For a very large segment of the population, life continues to be a

> grim struggle for physical survival . . . Millions of people in Brazil are severely undernourished, and some are literally starving to death. Millions of people in Brazil are afflicted with diseases directly related to malnutrition and lack of elementary public hygiene . . . It is on these realities that one must focus in relation to the economic data on unemployment, income distribution, and so on. The crucial fact is: These are realities that kill human beings.

Berger wrote at a time when environmental awareness was not a hallmark of the discipline of sociology; thus his diagnosis, accurate on its own terms, should be supplemented by these later observations of the ecologist Eduardo Viola:

> Uncontrolled exploitation of the forests and irrational monoculture are transforming important areas of the south, southeast, centre-west and Amazonic region into deserts . . . The debris of industrial production, the residues of toxics used in agriculture and the sewage dumped directly into rivers, have seriously endangered water resources. The quality of public water supplies consumed in the greater part of Brazil is dreadful when measured against internationally accepted standards. Industrial gases . . . have turned the atmosphere of Brazilian industrial cities into multipliers and generators of respiratory diseases. Cars produced in Brazil, with the exception of those made for export, are not installed with antipollution devices . . . On top of this, the general absence of sewers and inadequate treatment of refuse (aided and abetted by irresponsible sectors of the population who throw their rubbish anywhere, and also by public departments who rarely make provision for means of proper disposal and processing) transform cities into true 'minefields' from the point of public health. . . . Finally, to crown socio-environmental degradation, the production of arms takes up a significant part of the industrial and scientific-technological effort of the country, making Brazil the fifth exporter of arms in the world league.

That ungainly term, socioenvironmental degradation, emphasizes how this litany of natural abuse, which could have come straight out of an Indian environmentalist tract, is as much a human as an 'ecological' disaster. The felling of forests destroys soils and biodiversity, but also throws gatherers and collectors out of work. Toxics kill fish and radically alter the p.h. count of rivers, but simultaneously expose communities to health hazards by contaminating their sole source of drinking water. Car emissions help make Sao Paulo and New Delhi among the ten most polluted cities in the world, but also further debilitate the ill-nourished among urban dwellers. However, this process operates differentially among social classes, for the rich are better insulated from the environmental degradation they cause, enjoy

easier access to clean air and water, and can more easily move away from or withstand pollution.

At the first major United Nations environmental conference held in Stockholm in 1972, the governments of India and Brazil were vocal in their defense of development over environment. The Indian prime minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, delivered a stirring speech to the effect that if pollution was the price of progress, her people wanted more of it; the Brazilian representatives hinted, in the same vein, at the conference being a sinister conspiracy to prevent the developing world from developing further. Whether these official voices accurately represented the views of citizens was already a moot question. A year before Stockholm, a group of professionals led by the respected agronomist José Lutzemberger had founded the Gaucho Association for the Protection of the Natural Environment, or AGAPAN. This is generally held to be the first important environmental initiative in Brazil, the direct analogue of India's Chipko or hug-the-tree movement, which began a year after that first U.N. conference.

In the decades since the founding of AGAPAN and Chipko, environmentalism in both nations has emerged as a genuinely popular movement, country-wide in its reach, and taking up a range of ecological and social concerns. Environmental struggles in Brazil and India have revolved around a shared set of issues: forests, dams, pollution, biodiversity. This is no 'elitist' environmentalism but a movement that has taken into its fold communities at the bottom of the heap. In Brazil the environmentalism of the poor emanates from urban squatters and indigenous people responding to swift and dramatic degradation (such as pollution and the burning of forests), whereas in India it has been the preserve of long-settled rural communities—farmers, fisherfolk, pastoralists, and swidden cultivators—responding to the takeover by the state or by private companies of the common property resources they depend on (see *box*). In both countries protesters have tended to take the militant route, preferring methods of direct action to the patient petitioning of government officials and the judiciary. Brazilian and Indian greens have both been supported by sympathetic coverage in the media. The movements are also united in what they neglect: most strikingly, the role of population growth in fuelling environmental degradation. Catholics in Brazil are temperamentally disinclined to talk of birth control; Gandhians in India dismiss talk of 'over-population' as 'Neo-Malthusianism;' both groups train their guns on social inequities, in their view more centrally responsible for the deterioration of the environment.

RENEWING THE LAND, AND THE PEOPLE TOO

In 1985 sixty scholars, journalists and social workers issued a 'Statement of Shared Concern on the State of India's Environment.' Excerpts:

The process of transforming India into a wasteland, which began under the British rule, has continued under post-independence governments. The most brutal assault has been on the country's common property resources, on its grazing lands, forests, rivers, ponds, lakes, coastal zones and increasingly on the atmosphere. The use of these common property resources has been organised and encouraged by the state in a manner that has led to their relentless degradation and destruction. . . .

Nature can never be managed well unless the people closest to it are involved in its management. . . . Common natural resources were earlier regulated through diverse, decentralized, community control systems. But the state's policy of converting common property resources into government property resources has put them under the control of centralized bureaucracies, who in turn had put them at the service of the more powerful. Today, with no participation of the common people in the management of local resources, even the poor have become so marginalised and alienated from their environment that they are ready to discount their future and sell away the remaining natural resources for a pittance.

Indian villages have traditionally been integrated agrosylvopastoral entities, with grazing lands, agricultural fields, forests and groves, and water sources like ponds, wells and tanks. The state's development programmes have torn asunder this integrated character of the villages. . . .

The process of state control over natural resources that started with the period of colonialism must be rolled back. The earlier community control systems . . . were often unjust and needed restructuring. Given the changed socio-economic circumstances and greater pressure on natural resources, new community control systems have to be established that are more highly integrated, scientifically sophisticated, equitable and sustainable. This is the biggest challenge before India's political system—not just the politicians and their parties, but also citizens and social activists. . . . India can beat the problem of poverty, unemployment, drudgery and oppression only if the country learns to manage its natural resource base in an equitable and ecologically sound way. . . .

Source: *India: the State of the Environment 1984–85: the Second Citizens' Report* (New Delhi: Centre for Science and Environment, 1985), pp. 394–7.

Brazil differs from India in at least three major ways, all of which are reflected in the manner in which its environmental movement has at times followed a somewhat divergent path. First, a much higher proportion of its population is based in the cities, where the living conditions—that is, the quality of housing, water, air, and sanitation—vary enormously from locality to locality. The struggle for a better environment in the shanty-towns of Sao Paulo, Rio and the like has been an important feature of the Brazilian green movement. But India is in demographic and cultural terms a more rural-oriented culture. It was Mahatma Gandhi who famously remarked that 'India lives in its villages.' Since most of his followers have followed him in turning their backs to the city, the problems of urban pollution and housing remain low on the environmental agenda. Indian greens have been more comfortable in the forest and countryside, working with peasants plagued by waterlogged soils or with tribals thrown out of their ancestral forest.

A second difference stems from the higher levels of literacy and education in Brazil. In the early seventies, while the military was still in power, the educated middle-class—scientists, lawyers, journalists, etc.—cautiously began advancing an environmental agenda, at first taking up relatively uncontentious issues such as pollution and the protection of green areas. The organization AGAPAN was in the forefront here; it was only with the withdrawal of the military in the late '80s that greens began to more directly challenge the 'system.' In India, on the other hand, environmentalism drew abudantly on traditions of peasant protest; in fact, it was these protests which first alerted the intelligentsia to the problems of forest loss, soil erosion and water depletion. One might say that in India the professional middle-class has been *reactive*, responding slowly and at times unwillingly to the environmentalism of peasants and tribals; whereas in Brazil it has been *proactive*, well-placed to collaborate with and publicize movements of the urban poor as well as of forest-dwellers and dam-displaced people.

Finally, it seems that Brazilian environmentalism has been more deeply influenced by Northern debates. While *Silent Spring* was translated into Portuguese the year it was first printed in English, trans-national bodies such as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources have also had active and influential Brazilian chapters. American environmentalists, and to some extent the American public as well, have closely followed Brazilian developments and at times tried to influence them. Ecologically speaking, the destruction of the great Amazonian rainforest by settler agriculture and industrial mining has direct implications for life in the

North—through the loss of biodiversity and a sink to absorb carbon emissions—while, on the social side, the plight of indigenous people has played powerfully on the conscience of those whose forefathers ages ago decimated the native inhabitants of North America. Brazilian environmental problems thus have a high international visibility; further encouraged by the proximity—cultural, political and geographical—of the country to the United States of America.

In India, by contrast, neither Northern green classics nor Northern green bodies have had much of a presence. Again, the repercussions of environmental degradation—grave as they are—are contained largely within India, as are the agents of degradation, who are overwhelmingly government departments and private capitalists. In Brazil, however, both foreign firms and foreign aid agencies such as the World Bank have had a determining influence on the process of development through destruction.

These distinctions matter, but in the final reckoning it is the elements common to Brazil and Indian environmentalism that might matter more. In both countries the environmental movement has centrally contributed to a deepening of democracy, working toward a greater openness of decision making and a greater accountability for decision-makers. As José Lutzemberger put it in 1978, 'The citizen is realizing that he needs to participate in politics because if not the bureaucrats [and, I would add, the politicians] will steamroll right over him. He needs to participate to know what is happening and he needs to shout, even if it is in vain.' In both countries the environmental movement has moved beyond a concern with 'quality of life issues' to more directly challenging the official version of what constitutes welfare and prosperity. The politicians still urge citizens to make the necessary sacrifices for 'development;' the greens expose these claims for what they are, that is, as contributing to the persistence of social strife and ecological deterioration. Brazilian greens characterize development as it has unfolded in their country as 'predatory development;' their Indian counterparts replace 'predatory' with 'destructive,' but the meaning remains much the same.

A CHIPKO/CHICO COMPARISON

On March 27, 1973, in a remote Himalayan village high up in the upper Gangetic valley, a group of peasants stopped a group of loggers from felling a stand of hornbeam trees. The trees stood on land owned by the state forest department, which had auctioned them to a sports-goods company in distant Allahabad, on whose behalf the loggers had come. The peasants of Mandal—the name of the village which

adjoined the forest patch—prevented felling by threatening to hug or 'stick' to (*Chipko*) the trees. The Mandal episode sparked a series of similar protests through the '70s, a dozen or more episodes whereby hill peasants stopped contractors from felling trees for external markets. These protests collectively constitute the Chipko movement, recognized as one of the most famous environmental initiatives of our times.

Chipko was representative of a wide spectrum of natural-resource conflicts that erupted in different parts of India in the 1970s and 1980s: conflicts over access to forests, fish and grazing resources; conflicts over the effects of industrial pollution and mining; and conflicts over the siting of large dams. One can understand each of these conflicts sequentially, as an unfolding of the processes of *Degradation—Shortages—Protest—Controversy (local)—Controversy (national)*. Applying this scheme to Chipko, for instance, we note that deforestation in the hills led on the one hand to shortages of fuel, fodder and small timber for local communities and on the other to shortages of raw material for wood-based industry (with Himalayan timber being especially prized as the only source of softwood in India). When the state inclined markedly in favor of one party to the conflict, namely industry, the other party, i.e. peasants, responded through collective action. Picked up by a press that is amongst the most voluble in the world, the protests then gave shape to a debate on how best the Himalayan forests should be managed—by communities, the state, or private capital; on what species should be planted and protected—conifers, broad-leaved, or exotics; and on what should constitute the forest's primary product—wood for industry, biomass for villagers, or soil, water and clean air for the community at large. Finally, this region-specific debate led in turn to a national debate on the direction of forest policy in the country as a whole.

Within India there have been numerous little Chipkos, so to speak, but in the broader global context this movement of Himalayan peasants is best compared to the campaign in the Brazilian Amazon associated with the name of Francisco 'Chico' Mendes. Chico Mendes was a labor organizer who achieved international fame for promoting the 'ecology of justice' in a region devastated by reckless economic exploitation. In the Amazon, a massive expansion of the road network—with some 8000 miles built between 1960 and 1984—opened the way for settlers from the south in search of quick fortunes. Roads brought in colonists and took away the timber of mahogany, rosewood, and other valuable trees. In thirty years almost 10 per cent of the territory, a staggering 60 million hectares of forest,

or an area larger than France, had been logged or burnt over. An estimated 85 per cent of this had been converted into pastures for livestock; a most inappropriate form of land use on poor soils that were to be exposed and further impoverished by the next downpour of rain. All in all, this has been a colossal ecological disaster: in the words of one Brazilian scholar, 'the burning of the Amazonian forests represents the most intensive destruction of biomass in world history.'

Among the human communities affected by this devastation were collectors and harvesters of forest produce such as rubber, Brazil nuts, and the babasso palm. Unfortunately, these people often did not have firm legal titles to the land and forests they worked, whereas the ranchers and loggers had on their side the powers of a government determined to exploit and rapidly 'develop' the region. When the forests were taken over by ranchers—sometimes at gun-point—they lost their lands as well as their livelihoods. In the province of Acre, for example, ranchers bought 6 million hectares between 1970 and 1975, in the process displacing more than 10,000 rubber tappers. Aided by men such as Mendes, the tappers resorted to their own innovative form of protest: the *empaté* or stand-off. Men, women and children marched to the forest, joined hands, and dared the workers and their chain-saws from proceeding further. The first *empaté* took place on March 10, 1976—three years after the first Chipko protest. Over the next decade, a series of stand-offs helped save two million acres of forest from conversion into pastureland.

From the mid 1970s the rubber tappers have had a vigorous union of their own, and in 1987 they joined hands with the indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon to form a Forest Peoples' Alliance (see *box*). This alliance pledged to defend the forest and land rights of its members. It also worked for the creation of 'extractive reserves,' areas protected from the chain-saw where rubber tappers and others could sustainably harvest what they needed without affecting the forest's capacity for regenerating itself. But as the rubber tappers became more organized, 'the ranchers became more determined in their efforts to drive them off the land,' forming a coalition of their own, the Uniao Democratica Rural. In a region already scarred by high levels of violence, the conflict escalated in tragic ways. In 1980 ranchers and their agents had assassinated Wilson Pinheiro, a prominent union organizer. Eight years later, on December 22, 1988, they finally eliminated Chico Mendes, shot dead as he came out of his house.

There are striking similarities between the Chipko movement and the struggle of Chico Mendes and his associates. Both drew on a

long history of peasant resistance to the state and outsiders: in the Himalayan case, stretching back a hundred years and more. Both thought up novel and nonviolent forms of protest to stop tree-felling; protest forms in which women constituted the front-line of defense, a tactical move that worked well in inhibiting loggers. In each case the leadership was provided not by city-bred or educated activists but by 'organic' intellectuals from *within* the community. Neither struggle was merely content with asking the loggers to go home: the Forest Peoples Alliance proposed sustainable reserves, whereas Chipko workers have successfully mobilized peasant women in protecting and replenishing their village forests. Both movements have

AMAZONIAN VOICES

In its second national meeting, held in 1989, the Rubber Tappers Council of Brazil offered its 'homage to all those in the struggle who gave their lives for the principles affirming our regional cultures. Especially we remember our most illustrious comrade Chico Mendes.' The Council then resolved to struggle for the following program:

POLICIES FOR DEVELOPMENT FOR FOREST PEOPLES

1. Models of development that respect the way of life, cultures and traditions of forest peoples without destroying nature, and that improve the quality of life.
2. The right to participate in the process of public discussion of all the government projects for forests inhabited by Indians and rubber tappers as well as other extractive populations, through the associations and entities that represent these workers.
3. Public guarantees to scrutinize and curb the disastrous impacts of projects already destined for Amazonia, and the immediate halt of projects that damage the environment and Amazonian peoples.
4. Information on policies and projects for Amazonia and any large projects to be subject to discussion in Congress, with the participation of the organizations that represent those people affected by these projects.

Based on these principles, the Council also outlined specific programs for agrarian reform, education and health, credit and marketing, and the protection of human rights.

Source: Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn, *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers and Defenders of the Amazon* (London: Penguin, 1990), Appendix E.

taken recourse to an ideology that carries wide appeal in their societies. The two best-known Chipko leaders, Chandiprasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna, are lifelong Gandhians. Likewise, Catholic priests have supported the rubber-tappers; and as Chico Mendes recalled, when arrested after an *empaté* protesters would sing hymns en route to the police lock-up.

The Chipko movement and Chico Mendes's struggle are broadly comparable but not, of course, identical. While Himalayan deforestation has had disturbing ecological effects—in the shape of increased soil erosion and the incidence of floods—the clearing of the Amazon represents a much more serious loss of biodiversity, through the extinction of hundreds of species of insects, plants, birds and animals. (This is one reason why the Brazilian movement has attracted greater, and continuing, international attention than did Chipko). On the social side, forest conflicts in the Amazon have been characterized by a much higher level of violence. The traditions of democracy are rather less robust in Brazil than in India, and the expression of protest and dissent more likely there to be met with force. It is significant that while we tend to honor the Chipko movement for its *nonviolent* technique of protest, the Amazon struggle is more often remembered, at least outside Brazil, for the *violent* death of its leader.

One must note, finally, the prolific misrepresentations of both movements by the international media. The Amazon struggle is often reduced to the image of Chico Mendes as a 'green martyr' who died trying to 'save the Amazon' from its destroyers. Likewise, the most popular image of Chipko is of unlettered women 'saving the Himalaya' by threatening to hug the trees. There has arisen a mystique around Chipko and Chico that unfortunately obscures their real and deeper meaning, as struggles in which environmental protection has been inseparable from social justice.

REDEFINING DEVELOPMENT

Feeding on indigenous ideologies of justice—Gandhism, Buddhism or Catholicism—and emboldened by a more general assertion of 'eco-feminism,' the environmentalism of the poor has contributed to a profound rethinking of the idea of development itself. Intellectuals sympathetic to these movements have fashioned a critique of the industrial and urban bias of government policies, urging that it give way to a decentralized, socially aware, environmentally friendly and altogether more *gentle* form of development. These efforts have sometimes drawn explicitly on the ideas of the early environmentalists

Poster of Chico Mendes, leader of the Brazilian rubber-tappers, issued after the assassination of Mendes in December 1988.

SOURCE Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn, The Fate of the Forest *(Verso Books)*

Estes são os membros
da UDR no Acre

EXIGIMOS A PUNIÇÃO
DA UDR
NO ENVOLVIMENTO
DO ASSASSINATO
DE CHICO MENDES

Comitê Chico Mendes

Poster of April 1989, demanding action against Mendes' alleged killers.

SOURCE Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn, The Fate of the Forest *(Verso Books)*

discussed in Chapter II. But they have also been enriched by more contemporary thinking in ecology and the social sciences. Development as conventionally understood and practised has been attacked on a philosophical plane, but critics have been forthcoming with nose-to-the ground, sector-specific solutions as well. In the realm of water management, they have offered to large dams the alternative of small dams and/or the revival of traditional methods of irrigation such as tanks and wells. In the realm of forestry, they have asked whether community control of natural forests is not a more just and sustainable option when compared to the handing over of public land on a platter to industrial plantations. In the realm of fisheries, they have deplored the favors shown to trawlers at the expense of countryboats, suggesting that a careful demarcation of ocean waters, restricting the area in which trawlers can operate, might allow freer play to indigenous methods as well as facilitate the renewal of fish stocks.

As in the North then, in the South too there is an active environmental debate as well as environmental movement. To be sure, there are some salient differences to be noted. Where Northern environmentalism has highlighted the significance of value change (the shift to 'postmaterialism'), Southern movements seem to be more strongly rooted in material conflicts, with the claims of economic justice—that is, the rights to natural resources of poorer communities—being an integral part of green movements. This is why these movements work not only for culture change but also, and sometimes more directly, for a change in the production system (see *box*). And where Southern groups have tended to be more adversarial with regard to their government—opposing laws and policies deemed to be destructive or unjust—Northern groups have more often had a constructive side to their programs, working with their governments in promoting environmentally benign laws and policies.

In both contexts there has now accumulated a rich body of reflective work to complement direct action: although in the poorer countries the line of causation seems to run the other way, with intellectual reflection, for the most part, being prompted by or following popular protest (in contrast to the North, where books like *Silent Spring* might even be said to have sparked off the environmental movement). Finally, while Northern greens have been deeply attentive to the rights of victimized or endangered animal and plant species, Southern greens have generally been more alert to the rights of the less fortunate members of their own species.

One thing that brings together environmentalists in both contexts, however, is the anti-environmental lobby they have to contend

ENVIRONMENTALISM AND THE DEEPENING OF DEMOCRACY

Henry David Thoreau once remarked that 'In Wildness is the Preservation of the World.' The experience of modern Brazil seems to call for a postscript, that 'In Democracy is the Preservation of the Environment,' as these passages from a recent book explain:

The struggle against environmental degradation has increasingly come to be understood as a part of the democratic struggle to build and consolidate a new model for citizenship. Efforts to promote environmental rights have brought together numerous segments of the social movement, who have sought to ensure access to essential public goods such as water and air in adequate amounts and with sufficient quality to guarantee decent living standards; the use of collective goods needed for the social reproduction of specific socio-cultural groups such as rubber tappers, nut gatherers, fishermen, and indigenous people; a guarantee for the public use of natural resources such as green areas, waterways, headwaters and ecosystems, which have often been degraded by private interests that are incompatible with society's collective concerns. . . .

. . . It [is] clear that in the Brazilian socio-environmental crisis, ecological degradation and social inequality are two branches stemming from the same root, namely, the specific ways in which capitalism has developed in Brazil by throwing peasants off their land, expanding the frontiers of agri-business, encouraging land speculation and deforestation, wearing out land and drying up rivers, making traditional fishing and forest extractivism unfeasible, adopting an environmentally harmful industrial standard, overloading urban structures, concentrating wealth, and marginalizing population groups. . . .

. . . It is necessary to seek a kind of development that is not limited to preserving the supply and prices of natural resources as productive inputs. The majority of the Brazilian population is not interested in a kind of development that pretends to be 'sustainable' simply by technically reconverting productive systems and adopting a capitalist rationale in the use of natural resources. We should seek to change the determinant logic of development and make the environmental variable be incorporated as a component of the people's living and working conditions. This kind of change only depends secondarily on possibilities for technical progress. In fact, it depends primarily on the democratization of political processes. . . . To democratize control over natural resources, to deprivatize an environment that is common to society and nations, to introduce democracy into environmental administration, and to ensure the public character of common natural patrimony constitute the agenda of issues [for the environmental movement] . . .

Source: Henri Acselrad, editor, *Environment and Democracy* (Botafogo: IBASE, 1992), Preface.

with. In countries such as the United States, businessmen and industrialists have been the most hostile critics of the greens. In India and Malaysia they are joined by state officials and technocrats, with both private and public promoters of development attacking environmentalists as motivated by foreigners, as creating law-and-order problems, or as wishing only to keep tribals and rural people 'backward,' placed in a museum for themselves and their fellow romantics to gawk at. The most famous and powerful of these anti-environmentalists has been the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir bin Mohammed. In 1990, he announced that he and his government did not

> intend to turn the Penan into human zoological specimens to be gawked at by tourists and studied by anthropologists while the rest of the world passes them by . . . It's our policy to eventually bring all jungle dwellers into the mainstream . . . There is nothing romantic about these helpless, half-starved and disease-ridden people.

Two years later, in a document specially prepared for the Earth Summit, Mahathir's government insisted that

> The transition from cave and forest dwelling to village and urban living is a phenomenon that has marked the transformation of human societies from time immemorial. The environmental activists have no right to stand in the way of the Penans in this process of change and human development.

Not only with regard to the Penan, not just in Malaysia, it has been the signal contributions of environmental activists to speak truth to power, to ask of politicians and other rulers the uncomfortable questions: Development at what cost? Progress at whose expense?