India's environment: a review of four decades

Action on environmental matters is getting increasingly polarised by an environment *versus* development debate. The need of the hour is to embrace ideas without dogmas

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2014 has been a tumultuous year for the country. There were national elections, resulting in a change of the party running the government. It was the year of new promises, new action plans and much energy and noise.

2014 has also brought India's environmental movement to a crossroads. On the one hand, there is a greater acceptance of our concerns, but on the other hand there is growing resistance against required action and, more importantly, every indicator shows that things on the ground are getting worse. Our rivers are more polluted; much more garbage is piling up in our cities; air is increasingly getting toxic; and hazardous waste is dumped, and not managed. Worse, people who should have been at the frontline of protection are turning against the environment. They see it as a constraint to their local development and even as they may protest against the pollution of neighbourhood mines or factories, they have no reason to believe that their livelihood from natural resources is secured. They are caught between the mining companies and the foresters. Either way, they lose.

So, I believe, it is time we took stock of developments and future directions.

In the past four decades—the beginnings of India's environmental movement can be traced to the early 1970s, when the country saw its first environmental movement (Chipko), the launch of Project Tiger and enactment of the water pollution law—much has changed. And yet, not changed.

The worst indictment is that over 700 million people in India still use dirty, polluting biomass for cooking food and that an equal number defecate in the open. They do not have access to the basics—clean water, hygienic toilets that do not end up polluting rivers and groundwater, and energy for lighting or cooking. Clearly, somewhere we are going wrong, very wrong.

We must also realise that even as the problems have grown, the institutions for their oversight and management have shrunk. Many actions have been taken but, equally, many

more actions that have been taken have come to naught. Most importantly, while the environmental constituency has grown—many more people are interested in environmental issues—principles of environmentalism have got lost. In this way, the underlying politics have been neutered.

It is important we point to the fundamental weaknesses and contradictions. It is only then that we can deliberate on the directions for future growth of the environmental movement.

In my view there are distinct trends that need elaboration:

1. We have lost the development agenda in environmental management. Instead of working to regenerate the natural capital for inclusive growth, we have increasingly framed action as 'development *versus* environment'.

2. As a result, even though environmental imperative is now better understood, the constituency which is asking for protection has changed or will change. The management of natural resources—swinging between extraction and conservation—is leaving out millions who live on the resources. These people cannot afford either degradation of the resources or pure conservation. They need to utilise the natural resource for their livelihood and economic growth. In this way, the environmental movement is in danger of making enemies of the very people whose interest it is working to protect.

3. The debate on environmental issues is increasingly polarised and seen as obstructionist. In this way, the positive agenda gets negated and lost.

4. Environmental struggles are increasingly about not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY). This is understandable as people are the best protectors of the environment and are saying that pollution must not happen in their backyard. But the problem in a highly iniquitous country is that this can simply mean that we do not want something in our backyard, but it can move to some place where the less powerful live.

5. But we must realise that even as middle-class environmentalism will grow, which is important, it will not be enough to bring improvement or change. The reason is that solutions for environmental management require inclusive growth. Otherwise, at best, we will have more "gated" and "green" colonies, but not green neighbourhoods, rivers, cities or country.

6. It is important also then to look for solutions, not just pose problems that do not go away. But this search for technologies and approaches to environmental management will have to recognise the need to do things differently so that sustainable growth is affordable to all. It also recognises that new-age institutional strengthening is vital—we cannot improve performance without investment in boots on the ground.

7. This demands a new way of environmentalism—one that can move beyond the problems of today and yesterday—to embrace ideas without dogma, but with idealism and purpose. But for this to happen, it is time we imbibed politics that will make this environmentalism happen.

Schism at birth

The schism in India's environmental movement goes back to the days when the movement was born. Two developments took place in the early 1970s. One was born in faraway Switzerland, the other in an equally,

if not more, remote village in the Himalayas. Both influenced policies and built consciousness about the environment in India.

In 1969, Gland-based IUCN held its general assembly in Delhi and conservationists made a strong pitch for the protection of the tiger. In 1972, Guy Mountfort, a trustee of Worldwide Fund for Nature (also based in Switzerland), met the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, urging her to save the tiger from extinction. In 1973, Project Tiger was established, initially for a period of six years, to ensure the maintenance of a viable population of tigers in India. Six tiger reserves, representing different ecosystems, were set up and it was agreed that in the core areas—the sanctum sanctorum—no felling, grazing or movement of humans would be allowed.

Even as Project Tiger was being designed to protect the flagship species, another not-so-known movement was happening in the remote mountains of north India. In March 1973, representatives of an Allahabad-based sports factory came to the hill town of Gopeshwar in erstwhile Uttar Pradesh, now Uttarakhand, in the Himalayas. They wanted to cut 10 trees in the nearby Mandal village, allotted to them by the forest department. Villagers did not allow them to do so, and to make their point they decided to "hug" the trees. This action stopped the contractors. Some weeks later, the same contractors returned, this time to Rampur Phata, 80 km from Gopeshwar, with a fresh letter of allotment. But news spread; villagers gathered and, with beating drums, drove away the woodcutters.

The climax came in April 1974 when the wood contractors reached an even more remote village of Reni. Here the men were away to attend another protest against tree felling in nearby villages. The contractors saw their opportunity to cut and run. But they had not anticipated what the women would do. Gaura Devi, then 50 years old, stood up, gathered all the women and they hugged all the trees, daring the men to step over their bodies to cut the trees.

The news of this "Chipko" (Hindi word for hugging) movement spread. Anil Agarwal, founder director of Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), was then a journalist with *Hindustan Times*. The story made front page news. Environment was understood to be a survival issue—the poor in the country, not just its elite, were making their voice heard.

In this way, the birth of India's environmental movement started with a big bang and with two distinct ideologies. The first was situated within the approach already followed in the industrialised world where environment was an after-thought to development. Here, conservation was about protecting habitats of wild animals—as areas of recreation, education and biodiversity—in most cases, after people had already got rich. The second approach was advocating something different: how poor people could use the environment as a means of building livelihoods. In this case, environment was about development—two sides of the same coin. And because peoples' survival was dependent on the protection and regeneration of the environment, they would nourish and build a green future.

Round 1: Conserving forest without people

In this battle of ideologies, the dominant prevailed in the first round.

In 1980, the country passed the Forest Conservation Act (FCA), which centralised decision-making by making it mandatory for all states to secure permission from the Central government before diversion of forestland for "non-forest" purposes. This effectively meant that states had to run to the Centre for every conceivable project that would need forestland—from dams to village roads. While this legislation was designed to stymie loss of forestland, it also became a key reason for alienating people. Now, every project, from a local school to a culvert or a village road or even a water harvesting structure in the forest, required permission from the Centre. People complained of delays; state governments pushed files of big projects; life was held up only because people happened to live near forests.

Resentment grew, even in the land of Chipko. In the early 1990s, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, the leader of Chipko movement, complained that FCA had blocked the implementation of drinking water schemes in about 60 villages in Chamoli. "While small projects based upon the long-felt need of the people get held up," he said, "large, ill-conceived projects like big dams that cause large-scale deforestation get conditional clearance." He told *Down To Earth* (DTE) caustically, "why would a bureaucrat in Delhi take more care than the people of Uttarakhand of their environment, when they are directly dependent on it for their living and will even risk their lives when fighting

In 1980, the country passed the Forest Conservation Act (FCA), which centralised decision making and made it mandatory for all states to secure permission from the Centre for forestland diversion for all small and big development projects. While the Act was meant to stymie forest loss, it ended up becoming a key reason for alienating people

forest fires." (See 'Streamlining forest protection law', *DTE*, September 30, 1992)

Over the years, the Union government has made some attempts to rectify this. Now the regional office of the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MOEF&CC) has the power to clear diversion of up to 5 hectares (ha) of forestland without sending the file to Delhi. But still it makes life tough for people who need to build livelihoods in their land adjacent to forests. It makes people enemies of forests, not its protectors.

This, when there is no doubt that FCA intends to give some protection to forests because it makes it much more difficult to get forestland. How much, remains debatable. CSE's analysis (see 'Forest clearances on fast track', *p*30) shows that in the past seven years (since the 11th Five-Year Plan), 276,000 ha of forestland has been diverted. The rate of forest clearance has more than doubled since the beginning of the 11th plan period as compared to the period from 1980 to 2007. More importantly, as per MOEF&CC's own admission, over 95 per cent proposals are cleared. In other words, FCA leads to delays, complications, and even corruption. But not forest protection.

Then there is the matter of planting equal number of trees when forests are diverted. No project can be given clearance unless the state government confirms that an equivalent area of non-forest land has been made available for compensatory afforestation. But this is what is lost sight of. Everybody focuses on forest clearance—to give or not to give. As the 2013 report of the Comptroller and Auditor General showed, for the period 2006-2012, against the receivable non-forest land of about 103,381.91 ha for compensatory afforestation, afforestation was done only on 7,280.84 ha, which is a mere seven per cent.

It is also not known if the trees planted on the seven per cent of the total land given for

compensatory afforestation survived. Then there is another problem. As non-forest land is increasingly unavailable, state governments take away other essential land—community grazing or even peoples' tree groves—for plantation. But once handed over for compensatory afforestation, forest department says these have become forests, and so stand transferred to their control. They use the dictionary meaning of forests—a term coined by the Supreme Court when it directed that all land, irrespective of ownership, if it has a tree cover, is classified as forests and, therefore, protected.

So it is a joke. In this way, not only is the forestland being diverted, new forests are not being planted and, worse, the poor are increasingly angry about forest conservation. They lose again and again—their forestland is taken away for large development projects; they cannot even build a small road or school; and now trees are planted on their village grazing land and it is also taken away. It is no surprise then that the poorest people of our country live in our richest forestland.

Round 2: Not planting trees jointly

By the late 1980s, there was another attempt to involve people in forest management—this time through the country's afforestation programme. It was in the mid-1980s that the government under the then prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, had declared that it wanted to make tree plantation a peoples' movement. The Wasteland Development Board was set up and social forestry was the buzzword. But soon it was realised that planting trees involved more than digging pits—it was about institutional mechanisms that would give people right over the trees and a stake in management. It was at this time that Anil Agarwal and I co-authored a report on greening India, titled *Towards Green Villages*, where we showed how every effort to plant trees would be defeated unless people got benefits from these lands. It is important to understand that

India has the highest density of livestock and no wall can keep out people's goats.

All this built an understanding of the need to involve people in afforestation. Again, there were two positions—one that argued that village communities should be given rights over government forestland so that they could plant and reap benefits. But there was huge opposition to this idea. Many foresters and conservationists feared that this would destroy forests; people would encroach and take over these lands; or simply they would never manage the business of planting trees.

The compromise was called Joint Forest Management (JFM)—a scheme where trees would be planted on forestland and people would provide labour to plant saplings, protect them and voluntarily keep their animals out. In return, they would get usufruct rights over grass and a share of the timber revenue when the trees were cut. The forest department retained control over the forests through the village committees formed for the scheme.

There were many problems with this approach, but the final insult came when the trees were ready for harvest. In villages where people provided years of free labour to guard and grow trees, the payment turned out to be miniscule. Why? The forest department adopted a highly deceptive and ingenious method of calculating the revenue that would accrue to people—it deducted all the expenses of the department and then calculated the net revenue. In this way, the 20-25 per cent cut from the sale proceeds, promised to people, turned out to be a pittance. State after state, the experience is the same as the forest department uses convoluted formulae to calculate what it should share with villagers or decides that instead of cash it would provide development funds. In this way, it loses the trust of people and the country loses the opportunity to get real partnership in planting trees.

All in all, we have made tree planting a crime. The country has swung from one extreme position to another from the pre-1980s, when focus was on extraction, and now, in the post 2010 period, when we do not want to cut any tree because we fear it will destroy forests. This fear drives forest policy, which denies people rights to ownership or real partnership in growing trees and building local economies. We now import our wood—forest productivity is nobody's business.

Today, Supreme Court's strict directives on forest conservation, not management, guide the country's policy. There is a ban on tree cutting in forest areas without a working plan; the plans are either not made or do not focus on production. Then there is ban on saw-mills around forest areas, which provides an excuse not to build economies from forests. There is also a ban on green felling in high mountain areas; no removals are permitted in wildlife designated areas, and the ultimate protection is that all lands with trees get classified as forests. This allows the forest department to take over these lands, even as it cannot plant or take care of lands under its charge.

But what really hurts is planting a tree is now bound up in so much red tape that it is not worth the effort. Every state has its own rules to cut, transport or market trees—even if grown on private land—because of which people prefer not to grow trees at all.

Round 3: Forest rights but not resources

In the mid-2000s, during the first term of the Congress-led UPA government, came the third push for people's involvement in forest management—through the Forest Rights Bill. The Bill was meant to hand back land and forest produce rights to people who were perceived as encroachers. It was accepted that: one, most parts of the rights had never been settled—that is forestland had been taken over by the state government and people's rights were not accepted; and two, giving rights over forest produce would build local economies and improve the condition of both forests and people.

But the Bill ran into a virulent campaign—led by key conservation groups, who turned it into a battle of people versus wildlife. The forest department joined in as it opposed what it saw was redistribution of its land. In the fight that ensued, big issues were lost sight of. The populist nature of the Bill meant that it had to be passed; tribals did get rights over the land that they were already living on, but nothing more happened.

The big opportunity to build economies, based on these land rights, was never even considered. As a result, the real game changers—the provision for community forests and rights to minor forest produce—were forgotten. The fact is that the land, which was settled, is of poor quality and not really meant for agriculture. It is best used to grow trees. But because we still do

Today, no value is seen in forests. Projects for which forestland is required are, however, valued. This needs to change. We need value to be paid for standing forests; it needs to be shared with people who inhabit these lands. We need to grow trees in ways that bring money into the hands of the poor and we need to learn how to protect, regenerate and grow, all at the same time

not know the art and practice of growing trees, which can survive people and animals, we do not optimise on its potential.

Today, forest protection happens against all odds. There is no value seen in forests, but there is value seen in the development project for which forestland is required. Clearly, this is not the way to go. We need a value to be paid for standing forests; it needs to be shared with people who inhabit these lands; we need to grow trees in ways which bring money into the hands of the poor and we need to learn how to protect, regenerate and grow, all at the same time.

In this way, we have successfully disconnected environmental management from development. Today, the poorest people of India live in its richest forested lands. We need to move beyond conservation, to sustainable management of this resource. But we can do this only if we can grow trees and then plant them again.

This, in turn, requires partnerships with people who will benefit from planting trees. This is what we need to discuss and what we need to work on in the coming years. Environment must become India's development agenda again. This is the imperative.

Polarised debate: Playing defensive does not make winners

Debates are necessarily polarised and noisy. But the fact is that in real life we need to go beyond the absolute positions so that there is some resolution and some movement forward. In the ideal world, there should be enough trust and confidence that once we begin to move ahead, there can be reviews, assessments and course-correction.

But this is difficult in the current scenario where the world is unevenly divided, with the polluters, mining companies and dam builders on one side, and the rest on the other. The institutions that can help to resolve conflicts and take credible decisions have been weakened. Trust is lost all around. So, in this situation, the worst defence plays out.

But it is also a fact that playing defensive is not working in the long run. The environmental movement is able to stall, but not stop environmentally disastrous projects. Worse, because there is no space for the middle ground—how will a project work if it is allowed—there is no improvement in the situation on the ground when the project is finally and inevitably sanctioned. The entire energy is to block and, once cleared, the mission is lost. There is no emphasis or even capacity in many cases to look at the alternative that would mitigate environmental damage.

Take the number of clearances—forest, environment, coastal, wildlife—that are granted by the Central and state governments. The focus has been on the process of clearance— to give or not to give. This is when there is enough evidence that government after government has granted clearances as if there is no tomorrow.

In this respect there is barely any difference between the previous United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and the new National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. Let's be clear, the environment was not safeguarded during the previous UPA government as well—even when we had ministers, who were apparently very green. Very few (less than 3 per cent) projects were rejected because of environmental concerns; at the most, sanction was delayed. The system is today designed to obstruct and prevaricate, not to scrutinise and assess the environmental damage. The rules are made so convoluted that they have become meaningless. The process is so complex that the same project has to be cleared by five to seven agencies, which have no interest in ensuring compliance of the conditions they set.

It is a fact that there is no capacity to assess compliance and,
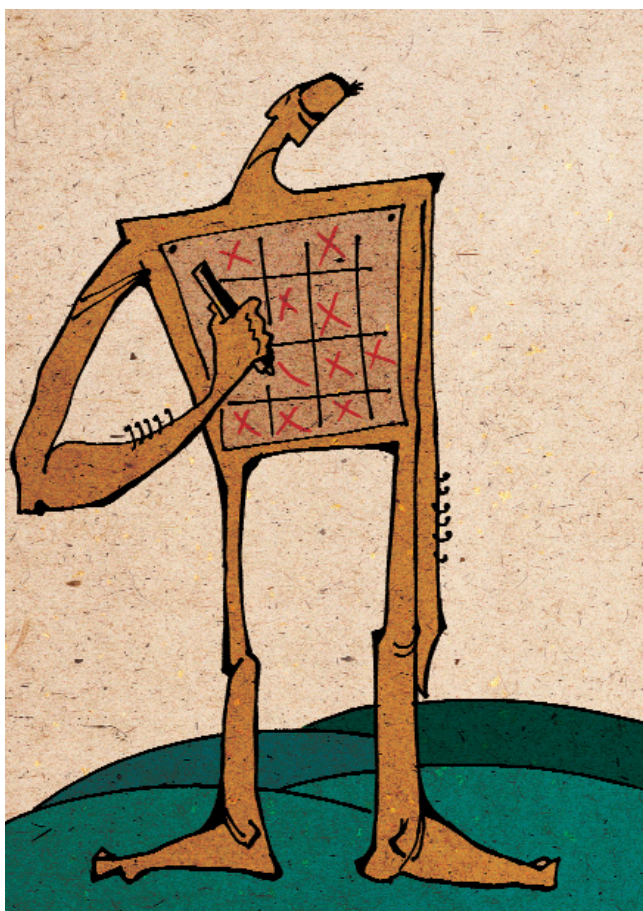
therefore, there is no way of checking that environmental conditions for projects are being followed. The laws to enforce compliance are so weak that environmental degradation goes unchecked. It is a sad reality that previous ministers refused to reform the system because it was easier to control and, thus, perpetuate power.

What is really at the core of this is that there is no focus on the project once it has been cleared. There is no monitoring worth its name to ensure that the conditions set at the time of clearance are followed by the developer. It is these conditions that would improve the environmental performance of the project.

The system has been so designed that we cannot invest in improving the environment. What happens today is a travesty of good management.

Once the project is inevitably sanctioned (with or without delay), activists and affected communities who are aggrieved by the decision take the matter to court—the setting up of the National Green Tribunal has provided another forum for this dispute. Their action can be understood because they have little faith in the credibility of the decision-making system—the environmental impact assessment is flawed; public hearings are abused and no importance is given to serious environmental or livelihood concerns. But the fact is that moving court only ends up stalling the process, not stopping the project or improving its performance.

In this way when the dam, mine, industry, power plant or any other project, including a shopping mall or housing complex or city or airport, is built, there is little focus on the conditions that would make it environmentally better, if not the best. At the time of sanction, a list of such conditions is laid out for the project proponent. But the committee, which sets the conditions, has no real interest in their implementation. The project proponent knows that nobody will come checking after the clearance is granted. So, the game goes on.

The community that lives in the vicinity of the project is left to face the consequences. But they are powerless by now. Their only call is to go to the highly understaffed regional offices of MOEF&CC or the state pollution control board, which are now in charge of checking compliance. But communities have no real data, no real evidence. What is worse, even the state agencies have no real monitoring data—they have been so dismembered and weakened over the years that today even they rely on what companies tell them. Let us be clear, industry self-reporting is the in-thing as far as environmental management is concerned. We just don't say it.

The last resort of the activist or affected community is to go to court against the polluting industry. But this process is not easy. The court requires hard evidence to show that the project is not adhering to environmental conditions. But evidence requires boots (or hands) on the ground, which don't exist. We need institutions that can collect data, analyse it, put it in public domain and use it to verify and improve environmental performance. Without this, even action by India's most well meaning and sympathetic judiciary is in danger of failing.

Even when the courts take tough action to stop the mining or polluting industry—from mining in Ballari to sand mining in rivers or closing restaurants in upscale south Delhi—these are temporary stops. The court needs viable remediation plans but there is nobody out there who is really interested in getting management right. Worse, when a plan is even presented and agreed upon, there is nobody out there to check implementation. So, as I said, the game goes on.

Agenda must move to solutions

So, it is time we called a spade a spade. We demand that there should be investment in better technologies, approaches and conditions to reduce (not remove) the environmental risk and then make sure this happens. This will also need serious capacity building, in the regulatory agencies and in civil society, to find real ways to improve performance—not create paper trails. It will then mean that we use the information about poor environmental performance to improve other projects or to reject them if needed.

It is not easy to do so. India (and other countries like ours) will require finding new technical solutions and approaches to solve environmental problems. It is a fact that the already industrialised world had the luxury of money to find technologies to fund mitigation and governance and they continue to spend heavily even today. We have huge demands on the same finances—everything from basic needs to infrastructure—and will never be able to catch up with the West in this game. So, we need to build a new practice of environmental management, which

Whenever a dam, power plant, industry or any other project is built, there is little focus on the conditions that would make it environmentally better, if not the best. The community that lives in the vicinity of the project is then left to face the consequences. Even courts can do little as there is no agency that can prepare and implement viable remediation plans

is affordable and sustainable.

In this way, environmental management options will have to be explored carefully and leaps made. For instance, when CSE proposed compressed natural gas (CNG) as the leapfrog solution for Delhi's deadly air pollution, it was initially scoffed at. Nobody in the world had done this. But we asserted that we do not need incremental steps to clean conventional fuel, but to change the fuel itself. It made a difference. Delhi could see stars again. But this was not the end.

As cars have increased, pollution returned to the city. So, new solutions have to be found—another lesson is that environmental management requires review and constant search. We find now that the answer is still not following the footsteps of the West. They continue to invest in improving fuel and technology, and stay behind the problem. Only 10-15 per cent of Delhi owns or drives a car; but these vehicles take up 90 per cent of the road space and contribute to the bulk of the contaminants in the air.

The answer is not to clean up fuel or improve technology incrementally. It is to leapfrog—to the best technologies today and to shift from private to public transport. The only way Delhi and the rest of the developing world's cities can clean up air is through a mobility revolution. But this, we know, is not easy to do. No city has built (other than Singapore) public transport without first investing in private modes of transportation. So, we need to go where no one has gone before.

But it is also a fact that the environmental solutions will need to meet the needs of all, and not few, in our countries. Otherwise, even as we clean up a few vehicles of the few rich, the poorer half will continue to pollute. This will negate all our efforts. And remember, air pollution is a great equaliser. Rich Delhi can buy its air-conditioned air and even its home filters, but it will find it has to share the same polluted air that the other half breathes. CSE's recent laboratory analysis shows that air pollution levels in the greenest part of the city are at the highest in winter, because of inversion. The airshed is common and the answers to cleaning it must be for all.

It is the same when it comes to river cleaning. For long, we have invested in sewage treatment plant technologies that were adopted by the rest of the world. The hope was that if they cleaned their rivers, they would clean ours, too. But we forgot that most of our countries do not have sanitation systems or underground sewage networks. So, even if the flush toilet of a few urban Indians is connected to the underground drain, and its waste is pumped for some length and transported to sewage plants and treated, it does not clean the rivers. The reason is that the rest (in fact, the majority) does not have the same connection and so their waste goes to open drains and then to the same river or lake. The end result is pollution and dirty water. So, again, answers to pollution control must be affordable—cut costs of water supply and cut costs of taking back waste water—to meet the needs of all. Again, this can be done. But it will require standing behind solutions, to work through implementation and to ask for everything to be done so that the solutions are scaled up.

In all this, the focus has to be development—hard and real. Take the dam building in the Himalayas. It is clear that the region is ecologically fragile and building infrastructure like hydropower projects requires careful planning and even more careful execution. But it is not enough to argue that no hydropower project should be built—as much as it ridiculous to say that the current plan for bumper-to-bumper projects should be allowed. The region has two major resources—forests and water—and it cannot be the case that these Himalayan states are debarred from making sustainable use of either. So, the answer has to be to evolve policies for ecological flow in rivers—ensure that rivers have at least 50 per cent of their flow, uninterrupted, at all times, and that this is monitored. The answer is to ensure that the first right to that generated power goes to local

communities, who can then use it to build local economies at local scales.

Today, we are doing none of this. Instead, we are caught between the polarised war of all dams or no dams. People who live there are also caught between total destruction of their habitat or no development at all.

New age institutions of governance

But for this to change, we also require the ultimate investment in our institutions of governance. Without them we cannot have arbitration or resolution of difficult conflicts. For too long in our environmental journey we have neglected this aspect. The rot has, in fact, accelerated in the past 10 years, even as environmental issues have been more mainstreamed. This is because governance has never been on the agenda. As a result, governments and civil society have invested all their political capital, bureaucratic time, energy of committees and media airtime to air differences on projects and policies' design, and not on the capacity that we have to implement these. We continue to churn out notifications and policies for regulating environmental degradation—everything from battery rules to hazardous waste management, to plastic disposal, to clearances for every building or shopping mall or penalties against illegal dumping of waste—without any consideration that we can actually do this on ground.

It is time we focused firmly and squarely on strengthening capacity of regulatory agencies. For instance, even after 10 years, the pollution control boards remain understaffed and grossly neglected. The problem is that this is an agenda that nobody really wants to touch—governments want to downsize or outsource governance to private sector or civil society. They don't believe they can fix what is broken and high profile environment ministers do not want to touch this as it brings them very few kudos. It is a hard job and is not immediately recognised. Civil society does not push for this because it distrusts the bureaucracy and believes that strengthening it will further corrode power of the people. So, the agenda is unattended and institutions are abused.

But this has to be the biggest lesson of the past four decades. We cannot fix things till we fix what is broken. There is no doubt that we cannot have the same "inspectors", but we do need inspectors with new-age tools of transparence, data analysis and do everything that builds public trust and credibility. Similarly, we cannot have same "sticks" but we do need even stronger enforcement systems that can make deterrence work.

If not in my backyard, then whose?

The environmental movement is based on the idea that people do not want something bad in their vicinity: not-in my-backyard or NIMBY. This concept has driven change across the world and continues to be the reason why projects, from shale gas exploration in the US to wind power in UK, face protests. Ordinary people, but with power because they are part of the voting middle-class, take up these issues because they affect their lives. The fight is personal. It is another matter that their fight leads to national policy ramifications—most often for the better. But there is also a downside to NIMBY—if it is not in my backyard, then in whose backyard should it be allowed? This is not an issue that is asked, or answered. But it must be.

For instance, in my city of Delhi, in the early 1990s, stone quarries and crushers operating at the edges of the city were stopped for environmental reasons. These simply moved to the neighbouring state of Haryana.

Then as real estate grew in this city, NIMBY demanded that these be stopped as well. So now stones—used in road and house construction in Delhi and in boom towns of Haryana—come from mines in poorer, powerless parts of Rajasthan. Here, illegal activity flourishes and it is said that the same mine owners—who first ran Delhi and then Haryana—have made it their base. Mafia rule is perpetuated, environmental destruction continues. We have not regulated mining or made it better; we simply banished it to where we cannot see it or where it does not destroy our real estate value.

It is the same in Goa, where the richer, more articulate middle-class people live. Its iron ore mining was stopped but that does not mean that Goa stopped its use of modern equipment that uses iron ore. Iron ore is now mined more feverishly and is causing much greater destruction in poorer Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. This NIMBY syndrome will not work in the divided and intensely poor India.

It is time we focused on strengthening capacity of regulatory agencies. We need pollution control boards that have skilled staff equipped with tools of transparence and data analysis and do everything that builds public trust and credibility. Similarly, we need stronger enforcement systems that can make deterrence work

NIMBY is different when it is expressed by the poor and less powerful. Why?

Take Vilappilsala village in Kerala, which is today saying it does not want garbage dumped there. The residents say Thiruvananthapuram—the state capital—has for long polluted their land and water. They even defied the Supreme Court, which allowed garbage dumping in their backyard. In Pune, the village of Urali-Devachi has repeatedly said that it has had enough of the city's garbage.

In Thiruvanthapuram, too, there is protest against a compost plant, which, middle-class says, "smells" and "pollutes". In Delhi's middle-class colony, Sarita Vihar, residents are up in arms against an incinerator plant, which is designed to convert waste into energy. They say it will pollute and add to their health risks.

The question is will these protests have different outcomes? Where the protest is from the middle-class, it invariably pushes the problem to somebody else's backyard. But where the protest is coming from the backyard, the issue becomes more difficult—where is the backyard in this case? Or if there is no backyard and waste has to be managed in the "frontyard", then its management will have to change. We cannot hide it away. In the case of Vilappilsala or Urali-Devachi, Thiruvanthapuram and Pune will have to seriously rethink waste management.

So, there is this one crucial make or break difference. When urban and middle-class India (as across the world) faces environmental threat it does not stop to ask: in whose backyard then? The fact is garbage is produced because of our consumption. The fact is that the richer we get, the more we need to throw and waste—and pollute. This consumption is necessary as it is linked to economic growth models that we have decided to adopt as our own. But we forget that the more we consume, the higher the cost of collection and disposal, which we cannot afford. So, we look for band-aid solutions. In middle-class environmentalism there is no appetite for changing lifestyles that will minimise waste and pollution. At least, not as yet.

The environmentalism of the poor, on the other hand, will force us to demand that development be reinvented, so that it can do much more with less. It is simple. If we cannot mine under all forests; or build dams on all rivers as we please; or build polluting thermal power stations in homes of people; then there are limits to growth as we know it. We can grow, but only if we do it differently. Not business

as usual, but business unusual. It will demand we reduce our need and increase our efficiency for every inch of land we take, every tonne of mineral we dig and every drop of water we use. It will demand new arrangements to share benefits with local communities so that they are persuaded to part with their resources for a common development. It will also demand looking for economic growth in natural resource sectors, like agriculture, fisheries and forestry, in a way that provides employment and livelihood options for millions of people—not build economies, which are jobless but growing.

In the environmental movement of the very poor there are no quick-fix techno solutions in which the real problems can be fobbed off for later consideration.

The history of Western environmental movement is different from ours. It began after these societies had acquired wealth. They had the money to invest in cleaning and they did. But because they never looked for big solutions, they always stayed behind the problem—local air pollution is still a problem in most Western cities, even if the air is not as black as ours. Climate change is showing its deadly face.

Therefore, the slogan for the next generation environmentalism must be different. Not-in-my-backyard should give way to "in-my-backyard" because only then we plan for development, which is sustainable, because we know we have to live with it. The planet then becomes our backyard.

This has to be the next 40-year slogan for India's environmental movement. It is time to make real change happen. Now, and forever. ■