

REBELS WITH A GREEN CAUSE

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

When Extinction Rebellion set out to literally block the path of the fossil fuel-powered economy in the U.K., in the autumn of 2018, the core of its philosophy was that stopping public activity with even small actions would change politics. It would shock a status quoist, cynically manipulative system, and turn public attention to the world's biggest problems: climate change and biodiversity loss.

The vision of its small group of founders led by Roger Hallam, an organic farmer-turned-researcher of civil disobedience at King's College, London, and Gail Bradbrook, a molecular biology scholar from Yorkshire who had launched her activism in the Occupy movement after the 2008 financial crisis, draws heavily from the U.S. civil rights struggle and Gandhian civil disobedience. The two worked to create an environmental movement that would use disruptive, non-violent methods in the climate and biodiversity struggle. It immediately appeared to resonate with common citizens, hundreds of whom were ready to court arrest in street protests.

"We refuse to bequeath a dying planet to future generations by failing to act now. We act in peace, with ferocious love of these lands in our hearts. We act on behalf of life," says the Declaration of Rebellion document of the movement. When it formally made the declaration on October 31, 2018, XR, as it has come to be known, expected a couple of hundred people to gather at Westminster outside the British Parliament, but the event attracted a thousand. Since then, its logo of an hourglass within a circle has become familiar globally.

The high visibility protests carried out by XR groups — three major ones so far — often involve dramatic scenes staged by brightly costumed activists to drive home the message of climate ruin. The movement has three primary demands: all governments 'Tell the Truth' about the climate crisis and the mass extinction of species, commit themselves to act on net zero carbon emissions by 2025, and create citizens' assemblies that will advise them on a just transition. Yet, the group also does not look to the government to solve the world's problems. It favours people collectively creating the structures to challenge power, eliminating the bias of the voice of the rich and the powerful. Among the core concerns it pursues are "decent healthcare, education, social care and housing, clean energy production, and protections in law to prevent ecocide."

Open source model

Like any good open source project, the U.K. kernel produced by XR has been embraced by activists abroad, who get the freedom to build upon it. A strategy document released by XR last year titled "Power Together" says it is now present in 75 countries. Legal systems and political tolerance levels for protest differ around the world, inviting prosecutions and harsh crackdowns. Yet, XR has inspired groups of citizens, particularly the youth, and professionals in different fields to start local branches. The India website of XR lists 14 local groups, ranging from Bengaluru and Delhi to Rajasthan and Guwahati. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, hobbled the climate protests in many places around the world.

Initially seen as nothing more than an outcrop of the environmental fringe made up of small groups of straggler activists, XR moved to the mainstream as it linked up with activists such as Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future campaign she inspired and acquired a wider base of supporters connected with the arts, sciences, law, and finance.

Over the past two years, the movement has received support from many prominent people,

including the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the former Chief Scientific Adviser to the British government, David King, public intellectuals like Noam Chomsky, actors, doctors, health workers, scientists and blue collar workers.

XR's most prominent rebellions have thus far been carried out in the U.K. against projects that are carbon intensive (such as the costly HS2 high speed railway line). Protests have also been held in other countries, including India.

XR launched its first major protest in April 2019, a two-week rolling wave of demonstrations, at which activists blocked important road intersections in London, one of them using a boat, hoisted themselves on to the roofs of city trains, chained themselves to fences, smashed windows at oil company Shell's headquarters, and staged mass "die-ins" in public to shock people into confronting climate change. Greta Thunberg told one group of demonstrators in London during the protest that they were showing the world the path they had chosen to take and were waiting for others to follow. There were over 3,000 arrests.

Yet, the path for XR itself has not been smooth, and the movement has been wracked by differences involving co-founder Roger Hallam. A major critique, to which the movement has responded, is on the role of minorities in protests and the impact that aggressive tactics have on them.

Just over a year after the mass protests in London, in July 2020, it acknowledged that its disruptive approach centred around privileged white people and put people of colour at risk vis-a-vis the police. Youth, who wanted a separate identity, formed their own sub-group, XR Youth.

Mass arrests

Mr. Hallam, now 55, looked at mass arrests — within the bounds of a democratic system that tolerates dissent — as a tactic that would overwhelm the government. "We recognise now that our tactic of arrest has made it easier for people of privilege to participate and that our behaviours and attitudes fed into the system of white supremacy. We're sorry this recognition comes so late," a statement said. More recent interpretations among XR activists view the climate change, COVID-19 and human rights crises (including rights of people of African origin) as the ramifications of an economic and financial system run wild.

Mr. Hallam was censured by the movement for making comments that described the Holocaust as "an almost normal event" in the long sweep of history. He apologised. Once a moving force at XR, he has taken part in protests against Heathrow airport expansion separately and describes himself also as a leader of another combative organisation, Burning Pink (BP), whose activists splash bright pink spray paint on property and court arrest in support of climate and equality objectives.

Gail Bradbrook, 49, is the prominent face of XR today. "I am involved in both BP campaigns and also doing mobilisation training and development work with XR groups around the world, as well as videos and interviews," Mr. Hallam said in an email to *The Hindu*. "Assuming COVID retreats, there will be a new impetus to mass civil disobedience given the situation is getting exponentially worse," he said.

Challenge policies

With every new crisis — wildfires, failed agriculture, drought, flood, heatwaves and coldwaves — governments and corporations are apprehensive that XR's idea of "collaborative rebellion" will challenge locked-in policies on fossil fuels. In the U.K., the movement is encouraging 'money

rebellion' by small businesses. Participants will fund green goals, and work to deny funds to non-compliant governments to stop funding of fossil fuels interests.

Disha Ravi, who organised Fridays for Future events in India, activists Nikita Jacob and Shantanu Muluk have provoked the government's ire. The implications of growing environmental and climate crises merging with other struggles, such as the farmers' agitation, add to the establishment's worries. XR is constantly tweaking its toolkit for non-violent direct action, attracting public attention and demanding responsible replies from governments.

In Focus

The vision of XR's founders draws heavily from the U.S. civil rights struggle and Gandhian civil disobedience

We act in peace, with ferocious love of these lands in our hearts. We act on behalf of life, reads its Declaration, released on October 31, 2018

XR has three key demands: Governments should 'tell the truth' about the climate crisis; commit themselves to act on net zero carbon emissions by 2025; and create citizens' assemblies that will advise them on a just transition

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