Anil Agarwal was a prominent Indian environmentalist – perhaps the first to see the problem through the eyes of the poor. The poor – because of their fast population growth were blamed for degrading the environment and rapid deforestation. Agarwal challenged these notions. He felt that the poor had a great stake in the responsible management of the environment.

Anil Agarwal was born in a business family of Kanpur. In 1970 he got a degree in mechanical engineering from I.I.T. Kanpur. He was a fiery orator and was elected as the President of the Student's Gymkhana. Agarwal was a man with a sharp intelligence and deep commitment and he displayed these traits early on. After graduation, instead of taking the well trodden route to the USA he joined the Hindustan Times as a science correspondent. He had a flair for dissecting complex ideas and communicating them with clarity. This exceptional ability for lucid, brilliant writing was soon recognized.

In the mid 1970’s he went to England and came under the influence of Barbara Ward – the high priestess of the environment and author of Only One Earth. After gaining sufficient international exposure Agarwal returned to New Delhi in the early 1980's and founded the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE).

The staggering breadth and depth of Agarwal’s concerns were demonstrated first in The State of India’s Environment 1982: A Citizen’s Report. In compiling this report he was helped by numerous grassroots movements and field activists. This landmark book was the first serious overview of the use and abuse of nature in India. The book honestly and attractively documented the reality of India’s environmental degradation. It got an overwhelming response and was reviewed in hundreds of journals worldwide!

The First Citizen’s Report came as an eye opener for insular academicians, blind state and sleepy public. It examined the ecological burden borne by women in dealing with a declining biomass-based rural economy. This helped in understanding the relationship between environment and development. Its contents were discussed and acted upon. It had a far reaching impact. The book was translated in Kannada and Hindi by famous environmentalists Shivaram Karanth and Anupam Mishra.

Subsequent Citizen’s Reports followed. In The Politics of the Environment Agarwal argued for a holistic management of land and water resources in the country. The third report focused on floods and the fourth appropriately titled Dying Wisdom documented India’s traditional water harvesting methods. While the first two reports drew on field reports of scores of activists the latter were produced in-house, reflecting the slow fading of CSE’s links with mass movements.

In Towards Green Villages, Agarwal emphasised decentralised control by village communities as a strategy for environmentally sound and participatory rural development. The CSE documented and brought into prominence initiatives such as Sukhmagri in Haryana, Ralegan Siddhi in Maharashtra and the Tarun Bharat Sangh in Rajasthan as holistic experiments in land-water management.

Agarwal did not trust political parties or trade unions as agents of change, but preferred to pin his hopes on grassroots organizations which he believed could pressure the state into action. When Rajiv Gandhi became the prime minister of India, Agarwal fully trusted Senior Gandhi’s commitment to environmental and agricultural reform. He became close to party leaders in the early 1980’s and was a key figure in the Green Congress in the 1984 elections. After the deaths of his wife and two children, Agarwal became even more dedicated to the cause of environmentalism. He travelled extensively, giving lectures and reports, and became an influential figure in the environmental movement.

Anil Agarwal’s legacy is one of a man who fought for the rights of the poor and the environment. He was a true visionary and his work continues to inspire and motivate people around the world to take action for a better future.

“If we care for the poor, we cannot allow the Gross National Product to destroy the Gross Nature Product any further.”

- Anil Agarwal, WWF, London, October 8, 1985
Agarwal received several honours for his work. IIT / Kanpur bestowed the Distinguished Alumnus Award on him. In 1987, the United Nations Environment Programme elected him to its Global 500 Roll of Honour. The Indian Government honoured him with a Padma Bhushan for his work in environment and development.

For more than twenty years Anil Agarwal was India's most articulate and influential environmental campaigner. He possessed an uncanny ability to synthesize the results of specialized scientific studies and to communicate them in simple language. He believed in not just highlighting environmental problems but in finding just solutions.

Agarwal possessed an almost heroic determination. He conducted a long battle against chronic asthma, and then in 1994 was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer which affected the eyes and brain. From his sick bed, while in remission he planned and carried out his last campaign. He died prematurely at the age of just fifty-four in Dehradun on Jan 02, 2002.

In 1989 Agarwal co-authored a pamphlet Global Warming in an Unequal World. This showed that the **survival emissions** of the poor – the methane released by rice fields was different from the **luxury emissions** of the rich – toxic gases released by their military-automobile-industrial complex. The West sought to blame the victims and reward the polluters. The rich Western countries accused underdeveloped countries like India and China for global warming and exhorted them to clean up their act. Agarwal termed it as environmental colonialism and urged the West to own up its historical responsibility for greenhouse gases. It was foolish, he argued to divide the **carbon sink** provided by the oceans and atmosphere in proportion to the magnitude of greenhouse gases currently being emitted by each country. A more equitable way would be to allocate each human being an equal share of the carbon sink.