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## Environmental Movements And Women's Participation In India

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### Abstract

The relationship between gender and the environment is primarily conceptualized in ideological terms in the expanding body of literature on ecofeminism in the West, particularly in the US. However, a growing struggle for survival in the developing world draws attention to the material foundation of this connection. It provides context for a different definition of ecofeminism, which the study refers to as "Feminist Environmentalism." Before the 18th and 19th centuries, women were seen to play no part in environmental conservation and promotion, and they were excluded from all main spheres of social life. However, after learning about their rights and responsibilities and becoming aware of their surroundings, they consciously raised their voices against environmental deterioration. Women play an essential role in managing natural resources at the family and community levels, and they are disproportionately affected by environmental deterioration. Women traditionally care for and maintain natural resources in their households and communities. Environmental damage and deterioration substantially affect them by depriving them of their means of subsistence. Women have direct access to natural resources such as fuel, food, and fodder; forests; water; and land, particularly in rural areas, where 70% of the Indian population lives and is directly dependent on these resources. Women are also accountable for using these resources to meet their families' necessities. This paper addresses two objectives: first, the conceptualization of the nature of the relationship between women and the environment; and second, the analysis of the contribution of women to environmental movements in India.

**Keywords:** Feminist Environmentalism, Ecofeminism, Environmental Movements, Environmental deterioration, Environmental Conservation

## Introduction

Environment comes from the French word 'environment' means surround. The environment is the entirety of the land, water, and air, as well as the interactions between these elements and with people, other living things, and property. However, women have historically been viewed as a weaker sex. Women are primarily in charge of managing and conserving resources for their families everywhere in the world.(Dasgupta1 & Gupta2, 2023) Fearless women are at the forefront of efforts to safeguard the world's forest resources and explore its water resources. Ester Boserup's book, *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, played a major role in igniting interest in women and their relationship to the environment in the early 1970s. Governments and politicians began to pay more attention to the relationship between gender issues and the environment in the 1980s. With the unique position of women in mind, changes started to be made to the management of natural resources and the environment. According to the World Bank in 1991, "Women play an essential role in the management of natural resources, including soil, water, forests and energy and often has a profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world around them".(Agarwal, 1997)

Women's time, money, health, and social support network are all directly impacted by the depletion of natural resources and environmental deterioration. As a result of deforestation, women's long-standing knowledge of forest products with great herbal and therapeutic value is being lost. Women are directly impacted by the careless and unconscious use of natural resources that has led to environmental deterioration.(Agarwal, 1997)

The environment protection movement in India began with the Kehjrali movement and gained momentum through the Chipko movement, the Appiko movement, the Save Silent Valley movement, and the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The major trend in environmental protection movements in India is that the majority of participants are women, Adivasis, and the poor. Women and the environment are inextricably linked, and the intimate relationship between women and nature spawned the theory of ecofeminism, a field that bridges ecological ethics and feminism and seeks to investigate the conceptual connections between environmental degradation and sexist oppression. Women, as farmers and collectors of water and firewood, have a deep link with their local environment, and women, children, and marginalized groups are the primary victims of environmental degradation, particularly during natural catastrophes. As a result, women are more active participants in environmental protection than males since they are directly affected and influenced by nature. Women have participated in a number of official and private forestry and environmental activities.(Shiva, 1988)

## Theoretical Framework of Ecofeminism

A subset of feminism known as ecofeminism bases its theory and practice on ecology and the connection between women and the land. Gender is a notion that ecofeminists use to analyze how humans and the natural world interact. The French author Françoise d'Eaubonne first used the phrase in her 1974 book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*. According to ecofeminist theory, a feminist view of ecology advocates for an egalitarian, cooperative society devoid of any dominant group, rather than putting women in the position of authority. There are many different types of ecofeminism today, each with its own methods and interpretations. These include social/socialist ecofeminism (also known as materialist ecofeminism), liberal ecofeminism, and spiritual/cultural ecofeminism. Ecofeminist art, social justice and political philosophy, religion, contemporary feminism, and poetry are some examples of how ecofeminism is interpreted and how it could be used in social thought. (Warren & Erkal, 1997)

The relationship between women's supremacy and that of nature is fundamentally seen as ideological from an ecofeminist standpoint, originating from a system of ideas, representations, values, and beliefs that place women and the nonhuman environment beneath men. It also challenges men and women to reconsider their identities and nonhierarchical methods of interacting with the nonhuman world. It is believed that the question that has to be addressed is the source of this relationship between women and the environment. (Tøllefsen, 2011)

Some feminists distinguish that women's affinity for nature is due to their shared experiences of subjugation by the same male ruling forces, not because they are perceived as "feminine" or female. Both the animalized vocabulary used to describe women and the gendered language used to describe nature are clear examples of marginalization. Because of their historic societal function as nurturers and caregivers, certain discourses expressly associate women with the environment. The consistency of socially labeled qualities associated with 'femininity', such as nurturing, which are present in nature and among women, is seen by ecofeminists from this school of thought as an example of these links. (Gaard, 2010)

In 'Ecofeminism,' Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies develop ecofeminism through a transnational conversation that unites feminist viewpoints from the West and the South. Their cooperation highlights both the contextual distinctions and the common issues in feminist and environmental movements. They see ecofeminism as a broad political movement that unifies feminist, technological, economic, and environmental criticisms under a single framework, rather than just as a theoretical framework. (Shiva, 1986) The idea of a "subsistence perspective," which emphasizes women as the primary keepers of ecological knowledge and advocates for a reorientation of science, technology, and knowledge systems toward biodiversity protection and communal sustenance, lies at the heart of Shiva's argument. This viewpoint opposes the prevalent instrumentalist and reductionist paradigm of contemporary science, which justifies the dominance of women, underprivileged groups, and the environment through dualistic hierarchies like man/nature and culture/nature. (Shiva, 1988)

Additionally, Mies and Shiva criticize the Global South's "catching-up development" mindset, arguing that the quest for Western-style consumption driven by unrestricted resource extraction is socially and environmentally unfair. They portray ecofeminism as a revolutionary response to the extractive logic of global capitalism, instead promoting decentralized, participatory, and subsistence-oriented alternatives grounded in local practices and group action. (Molyneux & Steinberg, 1995) She points out that "the capitalist reductionist paradigm does not recognize these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to the social benefits and sustenance needs, because it fails to perceive the interconnectedness of nature, or the connection of women's lives, work, and knowledge with the creation of wealth," she says. Shiva attributes this failure to the patriarchal views of growth and development in the West. Shiva claims that patriarchy has branded nature, women, and other groups that don't contribute to economic growth as "unproductive." (Mies, 2014)

Bina Agarwal views ecofeminism as an expanding movement that includes radical, liberal, and socialist feminism. Agarwal identifies the main points to determine its relevance for Third World gender and environmental perspectives rather than providing a complete analysis. Ecofeminist discourse has several main arguments. First, ecofeminism links women's dominance to nature's exploitation. Second, it claims that patriarchal ideology symbolically links women to nature and men to culture, while elevating culture over nature, legitimizing women's subjugation and environmental destruction. Women are seen as particularly interested in combating environmental damage and restoring balanced relationships between people and the nonhuman world because these types of domination are historically connected. Finally, ecofeminism highlights the similarities between feminist and environmental movements' normative commitments, especially their support for egalitarian and nonhierarchical social structures, which require a joint theoretical and political framework. (Bina, 1991) Agarwal believes that the relationship between women and nature is ideological, ingrained in representation and value systems that maintain gendered and ecological hierarchies, and demands a thorough rethinking of human–human and human–environment connections. (Bina, 1991)

### **Environmental Movements and Women's Participation in India**

The environmental movements in India deserve recognition for their emphasis on social challenges, as they work to address issues such as equity, justice, and sustainability. These include the Chipko Movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Silent Valley Movement, Navdanya Movement, and other environmental movements in India. These movements have consistently highlighted the links between environmental degradation and social injustice, aiming to protect the communities most adversely affected by environmental policies and development initiatives. (Michon & Canthel, 2023)

## Chipko Movement and the role of Gaura Devi

The 1970s Chipko Movement in India focused on forest protection. The movement's name, "Chipko," means "to hug" and symbolizes its goal of protecting trees from being cut down. Nonviolent resistance has become a hallmark of Indian environmental activism and inspired similar organizations abroad. Women were activists and leaders in the Chipko Movement. Women's hugging campaigns and coordinated protests; however, men were important as well. This leadership stressed women's environmental conservation and challenged gender norms. Reni native Gaura Devi, a symbol of resistance, demonstrated the endurance of grassroots female leadership. Chipko has an impact beyond Uttarakhand in the Himalayas. The campaign inspired forest preservation efforts nationwide.(Baker, 1981)

The founder of the Chipko (meaning "to embrace") movement advised women to hug trees to prevent their destruction. As a Mahila Mangal Dal leader in Reni, she led 27 women to oppose the loggers on the day they cut the trees. To fight ecological imbalance, the movement used Gandhian peaceful resistance. The movement sought to peacefully preserve the planet's delicate ecological balance, inspired by Gandhi's nonviolent resistance.(Pathak, 2025) In January 1974, the government auctioned 2,500 trees overlooking the Alaknanda River to a sporting goods manufacturer, sparking the Chipko Movement, when women from Uttarakhand's Chamoli village hugged trees to prevent their cutting, despite threats. The loggers left after they watched the trees all night. As word spread, more villagers joined the effort. Other sections of Uttarakhand saw similar protests, indicating women were fighting for the environment.(Mathur et al., 2023a)

## The Silent Valley Movement and Sugatha Kumari

Opposed the Kerala government's decision to construct a dam in the Silent Valley Forest for a hydroelectric project (1975–1984). Sugatha Kumari, an environmentalist and Malayalam poet, played a vital role in this campaign. Residents, notably women, opposed the hydropower project, despite the potential for jobs and prosperity in the region. Silent Valley became a national park in 1984, after the project was canceled in 1980 due to direct intervention by Indira Gandhi, the country's then-prime minister. (Parmeshwaram, 1979) Sugatha Kumari is a poet and environmentalist whose writing has focused primarily on the natural world. Sugatha Kumari was a key figure in the Save Silent Valley Movement, one of India's first modern-day environmental initiatives, which began in 1978 and ended in 1983 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi canceled a disputed hydroelectric power project. The contested proposal may have devastated significant woods across 89.52 square kilometers of land. She was a key figure in the Save Silent Valley Movement and one of the first environmental activists in modern India.(Swaminathan, 1979)

## Narmada Bachao Andolan and Medha Patkar

Locals, environmentalists, and human rights advocates are the leaders and organizers of the Narmada Bachao Andolan social movement. Because of the enormous ecological and socioeconomic ramifications

of the numerous large dam projects across the Narmada River, it was founded to oppose them. The Sardar Sarovar Dam, one of the largest dams on the Narmada, supplies water for irrigation and electricity to Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. In 1985, renowned environmentalist Medha Patkar spearheaded the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a strong movement that opposed the building of dams on the Narmada River. (Baviskar, 2000) It was predicted that around 320,000 people would be displaced by the multi-crore Sardar Sarovar Dam project. The Save the Narmada Movement was centered on the rehabilitation of these individuals. The residents were compelled to leave their cozy, humble homes, where they were happy to make a living, in exchange for a small sum of money. The financial assistance was only a grant-in-aid and was insufficient to allow a family to buy real estate elsewhere. In addition to opposing environmental protection laws, the movement supported residents who were being uprooted and subjected to discrimination, which was a flagrant violation of their democratic and human rights. They founded the NBA in 1989 and often fasted, thereby increasing public awareness. The only compensation offered to people affected by the dam's construction was rehabilitation. (Mallick, 2021)

### **Navadanya Movement and Vandana Shiva**

Environmentalist Vandana Shiva founded the Navdanya Movement in 1984 to advance traditional farming methods in India. The main organic farming movement is called "Navadanya," which translates to "nine crops." It is a nonprofit that promotes biodiversity conservation and organic farming practices. In addition to helping farmers create markets, the group has promoted high-quality organic food to consumers. Navdanya established 111 community seed banks in 17 Indian states with the primary goal of preserving seed variety against biopiracy. They participate in biodiversity protection initiatives and oppose genetically modified organisms (GMOs). (Mallick, 2021) Female farmers from all over India make up the majority of the Navadanya Movement's members. Renowned environmentalist and activist Vandana Shiva are against free trade, intellectual property rights, and genetically engineered organisms. She promotes the use of local seeds and highlights the significance of biodiversity preservation in her attempts to ensure the future of agricultural systems. She made the case in her 2004 paper, "Empowering Women," for changes in Indian farming methods that would encourage greater female involvement. She argues that more women participating in environmental initiatives would benefit the world. Dr. Shiva founded Navdanya in 1991 with the goals of ensuring food security in India and conserving the variety of indigenous seeds through fair trade and organic farming. In all, the organization has established 124 seed banks nationwide. Navdanya has helped to safeguard about 3,000 varieties of rice in India. (Anjali Shivhare, 2022)

### **Jungle Bachao Andolan and Suryamani Bhagat**

The Jungle Bachao Aandolan was a protest initiated in 1982 by the tribal population of the Singhbhum district in Bihar, opposing the decision of politicians and government officials to substitute Sal trees in the forests with commercially lucrative teak plantations. The initiative to replace Sal forests with economically advantageous teak became known as "Greed Game Political Populism." The movement, originating from a

struggle to reclaim the forest rights of tribal communities, subsequently expanded to Orissa and Jharkhand. The indigenous population recognized that the most effective method to protect their forests was to establish their property rights over them. (Menon, 2016) Suryamani Bhagat facilitated the organization of resistance and negotiations with the government, culminating in the enactment of the Forest Rights Act in 2006. Suryamani Bhagat is a tribal forest advocate from Kothari village in Jharkhand. She partnered with other women to protect forests. She initiated the Jharkhand Save the Forest Movement with merely 15 tribal women to contest government officials' proposals to cultivate costly teak trees that would be of little benefit to the community dependent on the forest.(Mathur et al., 2023b)

### **Kashipur environmental movement and women's participation**

The Kashipur tribals initiated Gandhian nonviolent Satyagraha to safeguard their land, livelihood, culture, and identities. The movement was underscored by performances of songs, dances, and poems during public meetings and hunger strikes at the company's gate throughout the years of struggle. An oral representation of the local issue was conveyed through Ideal dances. Public meetings were held multiple times at the school building in Kucheipadar village, while the Iwata Pada (weekly marketplace) in Tikiri village served as the primary venue for music and dance performances. During the previous rally, women positioned themselves at the forefront, dancing and singing while shielding their male counterparts from law enforcement.(Naik, 2012)

Mukta Jhodia, a 45-year-old tribal woman leader from Siriguda village in Rayagada district, Odisha, is opposing the Hindalco-led Utkal Alumina bauxite mining and processing project in Kashipur. She has received the inaugural "Chingari Award" for women combating corporate crime. Mukta has served as a crucial source of inspiration and enlightenment for the indigenous people of Kashipur. She has diligently traversed tribal settlements in the vicinity of Rayagada, frequently on a bicycle with her husband or son, to apprise people of Birla's intentions to exploit their bheeta mati (motherland). She states, "We are apprehensive regarding our own advancement." We prioritize agricultural development over industrial development. Constructing small check dams utilizing local streams will significantly benefit agricultural development. We seek jungle-based medical facilities and an educational system that aligns with our traditions and culture, which we have upheld. (Naik, 2020)

Sumani Jhodia is a 57-year-old woman residing in Siriguda Voice of Dalit 158 Iswar Chandra Naik village, Rayagada district, Odisha. She states, "Baphilimali provides us with sustenance, shelter, culture, and we live contentedly. This mountain is our deity." We inhabit these mountains and endure. We are a tribal community engaged in dangar chasa (shifting farming), which is our primary profession; without arable ground for sustainable production, we rely on the hills for our livelihood. If we relocate, we will perish; we cannot abandon our territory, forest, and the Baphilimali hills. Both leaders are at the vanguard of the movement. Several tribal individuals protesting land acquisition for copper mining in Kashipur, Odisha, have been incarcerated. Police have fatally shot several individuals.(Naik, 2012)

Participants of the Baliapal and Chilika movements arrived in Kashipur to elucidate their struggles and triumphs in securing their rights. Upon learning of the successful protest against BALCO, the residents of Kashipur were informed by the leaders of the Gandhamardan Surakhya Samiti about the strategies employed and the means by which they achieved victory. Consequently, the former recognized that a concerted effort would likely result in a favorable outcome for the populace. The residents of Kashipur have once again found the optimism to resume the movement. Previously, the local police denied them permission to hold public meetings, despite obtaining legal authorization from higher authorities. The company's miscreants would collude with the cops to obstruct their meetings. The Kashipur protest movement, rooted in democratic, peaceful, and Gandhian principles of Satyagraha, has secured authorization from the police and government for conducting meetings and has been providing them with information regarding their actions. (Sahu, 2024)

## Conclusion

Women have historically played an important role in environmental conservation. Furthermore, women can help reduce population growth, which has been a major contributor to dire situations. Women are best positioned to make the most significant contribution to family planning. Women have historically played an important role in satisfying home and communal energy needs. Inadequate energy supplies and a lack of access to effective energy utilization technologies force people to rely on their own labor, animal power, and biomass to meet their basic needs. With proper environmental education and understanding, women can conserve energy resources significantly more efficiently than men. Women were traditionally excluded from decision-making roles. Their unequal access to education, along with a lack of decision-making authority at all levels, has degraded their social standing. As a result, it has had a negative impact on income, nutrition, health, social support networks, and household knowledge. Women are naturally more aware of environmental issues. Because women are the most likely to utilize the facilities, it is critical to consider their perspectives when planning and implementing environmental projects.

This study thoroughly investigated women's involvement in India's environmental movements, highlighting their critical role in fighting damaging development ideologies and conserving ecological systems. Women have been at the vanguard of India's environmental fights, from the Chipko movement's mass mobilization of Himalayan women to Medha Patkar's leadership of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, Appiko's cultural activism in Karnataka, and Silent Valley's literary mobilization in Kerala.

These movements show how women's environmental activism stems from their material circumstances as primary natural resource managers, their traditional ecological knowledge, and their disproportionate vulnerability to environmental degradation. Women-led initiatives achieved substantial policy changes, such as logging bans, dam cancellations, forest conservation legislation, and the establishment of protected areas, through nonviolent opposition, innovative techniques combining traditional and modern means, and sustained organization.

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