

Eco-feminism in India

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Abstract

The environment is not conserved by a section of the society but through a collective effort of all individuals. Among these individuals, women play a key role, even in sectors that are indirectly linked to environment such as agriculture, mining, production, marketing and consuming.

Even the World Bank has noted, "Women play an essential role in the management of nature and resources — including soil, water, forest and energy — and often have a profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world around them." This is quite true. When compared to average male species, women are much more sensitive and communicative towards nature and its conservation. Therefore, it is important to involve women in protecting the environment. Women will not only conserve the environment but also help create awareness among their family members and the larger society to be more responsible towards the environment.

Eco feminism, thus, describes movements and philosophies that link feminism and ecology. This paper discusses the role of women, with special context to India, in protecting the environment, maintaining ecological balance and engaging in sustainable development for the benefit of the society.

To begin with, we must understand what ecofeminism is? Ecofeminism as a concept and a tool for human traces back its origin and development in the Western Countries. The human sciences study biological, social, and cultural aspects of human life, as well as the behavior and relationship of human beings with other things in the environment; this has paved the way for the rise of discourses like ecofeminism to solve problems related to women and nature.

The Ecofeminist discourse in the West coincides with the emergence of ecological discourses such as deep ecology, shallow ecology, and ecocriticism both in the Natural Sciences—and physical sciences for example, physics, chemistry and astronomy. As the term ecofeminism itself indicates, it is a meeting place of two enterprises—Feminism and the Ecocritical discourses. In the context of ecofeminism, it is necessary to first understand the concept of feminism as a theoretical enterprise. Feminism does not simply derive from the exploitation of women by men but, as the major ecofeminists posit, it includes how women are the victims of the degradation of nature because of their close association and dependency on it (Merchant, 1980; Plumwood, 1993, 2002; Shiva, 2010, 2012).

Keywords

Women, Feminism, Ecofeminism, Environment, Gender, Ecology, India, Society.

Introduction

1.1 Role of women

A woman, as everyone knows, plays several roles, both inside and outside the house. She's a wife, a mother, a daughter, a teacher, a preacher, an activist, a leader and so much more. Thus, it is rightly said that if you educate a boy/man, you educate one person but if you educate a girl/woman, you educate the entire family. A woman teaches her child the value and importance of preserving Mother Nature. A woman takes forward the culture and traditions of her family or community and passes them on to the next generation. A lot of these cultures and traditions are intertwined with the nature and revolve around protecting it and encouraging its healthy growth. Role of women in environment, in fact, hasn't only been restricted to conserving nature but it's extended to their social, cultural and emotional activities.

There are several theories that suggest that if given a chance, a woman can protect the environment better than a man. However, there is no hypothesis and it's more of a conjecture than a study but some theories suggest that the strong affiliation between the environment and women could be because of dominance of men over them. It is not the most feminist theory, but it's still a theory. Another thing to note here, when talking about men and women's different attitudes towards the environment, is that while most men eye environment as a commercial commodity, most women respect it for basic needs.

It is therefore, necessary for women to be as much involved in environment as they can to ensure that the resources aren't depleted and environment not degraded mercilessly.

Women are stronger than men are. We need to use this strength for a good cause. Environment is one such good cause.

1.2 Definition of ecofeminism

Feminism is a collection of movements or ideologies at establishing and defending equal political and social rights for women. Meanwhile, ecofeminism describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology.

The name 'ecofeminism' was coined by French feminist Françoise D'Eaubonne in 1974.

Ecofeminism, also called ecological feminism, has been defined as a branch of feminism that examines the connections between women and natureⁱ.

Mary Mellor has elaborated this point by stating, "Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. It emerged in the mid-1970s alongside second-wave feminism and the Green Movement. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women."ⁱⁱ

A United Nations environment panel, at a conference in 2002 agreed, "Involving women in protecting the environment would help societies develop the sense of responsibility needed to maintain a good balance between humans and the Earth's resources."ⁱⁱⁱ

Ecofeminism uses the basic doctrine of feminism, which is equality between genders and a perception that believes in respecting organic processes, holistic connections, and collaborative efforts. Through these commitments towards the environment, women are able to create greater awareness about nature, and how nature and women should be treated in our male-dominated world. Ecofeminism, thus, is responsible for dissecting who the patriarchal society is exerting pressure on women and nature. Through this process, women become more sensitive towards the nature and take it upon themselves to shield it. Eventually, women teach how to embrace life and nature for the benefit of both the nature and the humans.

According to another United Nations report, "Women farmers control less land than men do, and also have limited access to inputs, seeds, credits, and extension services. Less than 20 per cent of landholders are women"^{iv}. However, if women farmers had the same access to tools and credit, there would be up to 150 million fewer hungry people.^v

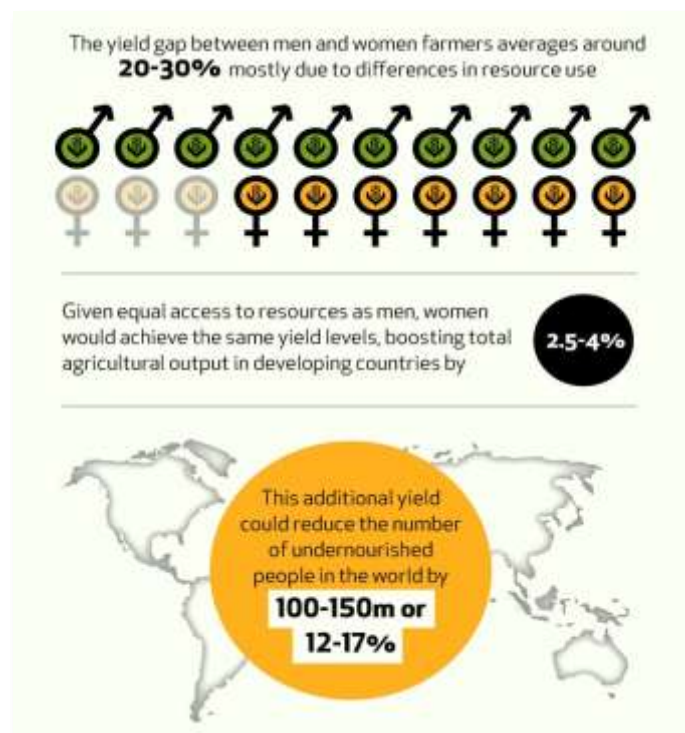


Figure 1.1: A possible scenario if women farmers are given equal opportunities as men.

2. Challenges

Despite statistics proving that increased role of women in protecting and preserving the environment can have a better impact on nature, women in India and abroad are only marginally given the chance that they deserve. There are several challenges that ecofeminism faces today. These include:

- ~ Responsibility of household chores lies on the women alone
- ~ Women are not considered breadwinners but breadmakers
- ~ Ensuring security of cooked food in the house is the job of the women
- ~ Lack of formal education is a barrier towards knowledge building
- ~ Most women do not have the power to take decisions
- ~ Lack of awareness about reproductive rights
- ~ Inefficient health care for improved health and longevity
- ~ Women have to often migrate to different cities due to marriage
- ~ Gender bias is an issue across the country
- ~ Slow progress towards equality is hampering development

3. Review of literature

Across the country, there have been several major environmental movements that have been led by women. In fact, as mentioned earlier, women play an integral role in protecting the environment all around the globe. Let us discuss here some environment movements that have seen key involvement and engagement of the female gender.

3.1 Chipko Movement

One of the first environmentalist movement led by women was the Chipko Movement of India. The word 'chipko' is derived from a Hindi word which means to 'embrace' or 'stick together' (with glue).

Most people believe that the Chipko Movement is a protest that saved trees in the 1970s. However, the movement only picked up pace in the 1970s. The actual period of the Chipko Movement starting in India dates back to the 18th century when the Maharaja of Jodhpur wanted to fell trees to construct his palace and damage the habitat of thousands of tribal who lived in the forests. A women named Amrita Devi, along with over 80 other women from her tribe, led the protest against the felling of the trees and guarded them for nights. However, they could not be very successful and the king's men cut down the trees.

Several such protests were held over the next two centuries across the country. In 1973, there was another similar attempt when the state government had planned to cut down trees in a Garhwal Himalayas forest in Uttarakhand. However, the tribal women courageously stood guarding the trees by hugging them as if the trees were their children.

It must be noted how the 'embracing' of the trees brings forth the relationship a woman has with nature. Women don't consider nature has a commodity or means through which they can gain benefits but they consider it a part of themselves and, thus, feel the need to protect it. Their act meant, "If you want to chop the trees, you'll have to chop ustoo."

The nature didn't belong to the women alone, it belonged to the men of the village too.

But it was the women who stood up for the cause.

After shielding the trees from axe-holding forest butchers for days and nights, the movement eventually proved to be an act of defiance against the government's permission to a corporation for commercial logging for subsequent financial gains.

Organized by an NGO led by Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna, the Chipko movement adopted the slogan, "Ecology is permanent economy."^{vi}

Soon, the Chipko Movement became a benchmark for socio-ecological movements led by women in states like Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar and even Karnataka. In the recent years, the movement has inspired thousands of people to work for water management, energy conservation, afforestation and recycling in the Himalayas and across the India.

3.2 Navdanya Movement

In 1982, renowned environment activist Vandana Shiva initiated an ecofeminist movement when she reinstated a farming system centered on engaging women and changing the current system of farming. She founded the organisation Navdanya to promote biodiversity conservation and organic farming, besides creating markets for farmers and promoting quality food for consumers.

Here it must be noted that the need to engage women at a large scale in farming arose from the fact that they were always marginalised and pushed into their homes to do the household chores. According to Farming First, the female shares of population economically active in agriculture in South East Asia is less than 50 per cent.^{vii}

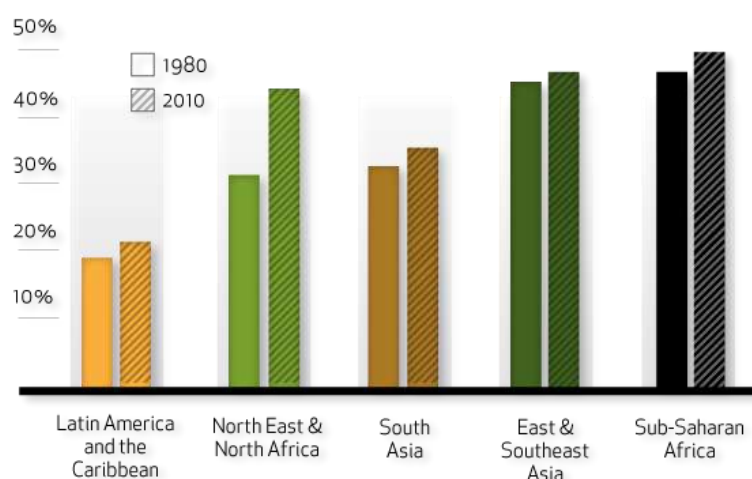


Figure 1.2 Female share of population economically active in agriculture

Navdanya means 'nine grains' and is symbolic of the most important grains on which Indian agriculture is based. Navdanya has helped set up 54 community seed banks across the country, trained over 5,00,000 farmers in seed sovereignty, food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture over the past two decades, and helped set up the largest direct marketing, fair trade organic network in the country under its label.^{viii} The organisation also carries out intensive scientific research on organic food and the risks of chemical farming and genetic engineering, besides creating awareness for organic farming.

Vandana Shiva has, in fact, led several movements for the benefit of the farmers. The 63-year-old lady is an anti-globalisation, anti-corporate and a radical ecofeminist who focuses her campaigns on food and agriculture socio-economic issues, and opposes genetically modified food.

3.3 Narmada Bachao Andolan

The Narmada Bachao Andolan is a large-scale movement against a number of dams being constructed across the river Narmada, which flows through parts of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra in India. Among the many tribals, farmers, environmentalists, celebrities and human rights activists who had taken part in this movement, tribal women and environment activist Medha Patkar have played a key role in mobilising the community and raising awareness about the risks that the people might face on account of the unfettered construction of the dams. It was, in fact, Medha Patkar who established the Narmada Bachao Andolan in 1989 to lead a non-violent protest against the government's rampant construction on the river. She also went on a fast for 22 days to protect the river.

It also started with the government's plan is to build 30 large, 135 medium and 3,000 small dams to harness the waters of the Narmada and its tributaries. The proponents of the dam claim that this plan would provide large amounts of water and electricity, which are desperately required for the purposes of development.^{ix} However, the government has failed to calculate the risk of imposing so many barriers in the flow of the river, the need to rehabilitate the community with full respect and the impact the building of dams would have

on the tribals, flora and fauna of the region, besides of course the effect on earth and the environment. The proposed Sardar Sarovar Dam and Narmada Sagar will displace more than 2,50,000 people.^x

Today, the Narmada Bachao Andolan is seen as one of the most powerful mass movements in action since 1985. Led by Medha Patkar, the movement has now turned into an international protest and has gained support from all NGOs around the globe. "Protestors are agitating the issue through mass media, hunger strikes, massive marches, rallies and screening of several documentary films. The Narmada Bachao Andolan has even been pressurizing the World Bank to withdraw its loan from the dam construction project through media."^{xi}

3.4 Green Belt Movement

India women alone are not the leaders of environment movements. There are hundreds of more women like them, spread across the globe, who're contributing towards protecting the environment for the larger good of the community. One such international environment movement, led by the women is the Green Belt Movement.

The Green Belt Movement is, in fact, one of the biggest in women and environment history.^{xii} This movement was founded in June 1977 by Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai when a group of women planted seven trees in Maathai's backyard. Over the years, women continued to plant trees and by 2005, 30 million trees had been planted by the participants the movement.

"When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and hope," Maathai believed.

The Green Belt Movement is now recognised worldwide as an environmental organisation that empowers communities, particularly women, to conserve the environment and improve livelihoods. The movement was founded to respond to the needs of rural Kenyan women who reported that their streams were drying up, their food supply was less secure, and they had to walk further and further to get firewood for fuel and fencing. GBM encouraged the women to work together to grow seedlings and plant trees to bind the soil,

store rainwater, provide food and firewood, and receive a small monetary token for their work.^{xiii}

3.5 Kenyan LandTakeover

A large part of Kenya in mid-1980s saw major protests against the elites and big foreign corporations who were coercing and controlling the production of land. Instead of allowing food to be grown for survival, women were pressured to cultivate coffee for export. The protests continued for years until a power shift in Kenya decided to redistribute the land.

Since its founding, the Movement has created a national network of 6,000 village nurseries, designed to combat creeping desertification, restore soil health and protect water catchment areas. About 20 million trees have been planted by the 50,000 women members.^{xiv}

4. Empowering through ecofeminism

If women of India and Kenya can lead such great environment movements like the ones mentioned above, imagine what all they will be capable of if they are given equal access of resource (as compared to men) to protect and preserve the environment.

The relationship that a woman has with nature cannot be matched with what a man has with nature. This is because of the love that a woman shares for the nature and the need to shield a woman feels for the environment. At the same time, ecofeminism also has its route in the patriarchal society where men have always dominated the women and the environment for their personal needs and pleasures.

It is, therefore, very important for the number of women environmentalists to increase, for tribals to be aware of the benefits of their surroundings and for women to engage in activities for the preservation, protection and conservation of the environment.

Conclusion

The Conference on Environment and Development, at Stockholm in 1972 was an important conference as issues related to environment and ecology entered into the mainstream discourse. This conference paved the way for development and social movements. The highlights of the conference were differential rates of consumption of natural resources by the developed and Third World countries which were issues of global political economy. It highlighted the protest movements against environmental destruction and struggles for survival and highlight the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply entangled in it. It is the poor, lower class and lower caste, and within them, the peasant and tribal women, who are worst, affected and hence, they are the most active in the protests.

Women, therefore, cannot be homogenized into the category (as the ecofeminists tend to do), either within the country or across the globe. Women as women have a special relationship with nature as ecofeminists argue, is proved wrong when one analyses the various protest movements. The interactions of women with nature and their responses to environmental degradation must be analysed and located within the material reality of gender, caste class and race-based division of labour, property and power. Women are the main victims of environmental degradation as well as active agents in the regeneration and protection of the environment. The adverse class-gender effects of these processes are reflected in the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems and livelihood strategies on which poor, rural women depend. (Rao, 2012:138). The nature and impact of the processes of environmental degradation

ⁱ*Ecofeminism / Sociology and Environmentalism (Encyclopedia Britannica Online) / www.britannica.com*

ⁱⁱ*Mellor, M. (1997). Feminism & Ecology (p. 1). New York University Press*

ⁱⁱⁱ*Importance of Women's Participation in Protecting Environment Stressed, as Women's Commission Holds Second Expert Panel Discussion / Meetings Coverage and Press Releases (UN News Center)*

^{iv}*Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment (UN Women Online)*

^v*FarmingFirst/Aglobalcoalitionforsustainableagriculturaldevelopment(FarmingFirst)/<http://www.farmingfirst.org>*

^{vi}*James, George Alfred (2013). Ecology Is Permanent Economy: The Activism and Environmental Philosophy of Sunderlal Bahuguna*

^{vii}*FarmingFirstOnline / http://www.farmingfirst.org/women_infographic/*

^{viii}*Navdanya-India'sBiggestOrganicMovementJust means / www.justmeans.com/blogs/navdanya-indias-biggest-organic-movement*

^{ix}*ABrief Introduction toTheNarmadaIssue / Friends of River Narmada / www.narmada.org/introduction.html*

^x*NarmadaBachaoAndolan(HistoryofthemovementandMedhaPatkar: EcoIndia/www.ecoindia.com/education/narmada-bachao-andolan.html*

^{xi}*NarmadaBachaoAndolan(HistoryofthemovementandMedhaPatkar: EcoIndia/www.ecoindia.com/education/narmada-bachao-andolan.html*

^{xii}*Women and Environment | Wikipedia | https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_and_the_environment*

^{xiii}*www.greenbeltmovement.org*

^{xiv}*Judi W. Wakhungu, Chris Huggins and Elvin Nyukuri. 2008. "Land Tenure and Violent Conflict in Kenya." African Centre for Technology Studies. Available online at: http://www.acts.or.ke/reports/RelatedResource/Land_Tenure_Brochure.pdf, accessed on 15 December 2010.*