

Issues and Challenges Related to Women and Environment

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Abstract

A civilization remains healthy and strong as long as it protects the environment and learns to live in harmony with nature. Environmental protection is an important aspect that has been of utmost concern in the present century. Throughout history, women and nature have been regarded as subjugated entities by men and this common subordination makes a close affiliation between women and nature. From very beginning women have seen the environment as a resource for supporting their basic needs. They have been using the land to produce food for their family. The changes in the environment like deforestation mostly affect the women and enhance their suffering. From the last few years, Indian Women have played a key role in the protection of biological diversity through their varied responsibilities. Keeping in view the role played by them, they can best be defined as crusaders against environmental degradation. The past decades have seen an increasing resistance to the ecological destruction in the form of movements. These ecological movements in India indicate how women are being severely affected by environmental degradation and today they are also seen as critical agents of change. This paper aims to focus upon the issues and challenges related to woman and the environment. Along with that, various measures for enhancing participation of women in environmental management for sustainable development have also been discussed.

Introduction

All forms of life on earth are shaped by environmental conditions and the interdependence of man-environment relation is indisputable. Not only this, even the relationship between the Women and the Environment has become more clear and obvious over the past few years. If we look into the recent literature available on environment and development, it has particularly stressed upon women's work, which is often linked to the environment and reveals how most of this work is made harder through environmental degradation. Women living in the rural areas of the Third World countries like India play a major role in managing natural resources-soil, water, forest and energy. Their tasks in agriculture and animal husbandry as well as in the household make them the daily managers of the living environment. They have a profound knowledge of the plants, animals and ecological processes around them. Thus, keeping in view the interrelationship between the women and the environment, it is difficult to define where 'environment' begins or ends for the 'women' in developing countries like India. Almost all development activities affect their surroundings especially in rural areas. Any changes in agriculture, forestry, water and waste management, all have local environmental implications which affect women in one way or the other. Besides this, the women too have played a significant role in the ecological history of India. However, their role in the ecological struggles and debates and more importantly their critical role in the conservation method remain 'hidden from history' largely because women themselves remained invisible in the development process. The emergence of 'ecofeminism' in the early 1970s was the first most enthusiastic expression of women's connection with nature. It is based on the theory that women have

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Susan Buckingham, *Gender and Environment*, Routledge, New York, USA, 2000, p.1.

greater appreciation of humanity's relationship to the natural world. It is a movement that sees critical connections between the domination of nature and exploitation of women.

Historically speaking, all the existing religious texts of India have mentioned the environment as something to be cherished and having a close relationship with, since it provided life. The protection and preservation of the natural resources was at the forefront of ecological knowledge for pre-colonial India, since natural environment was seen as a source of spiritual guidance as well as material sustenance. The native people of India were free to use and preserve the land for survival, ritual, celebration, worship, etc., and nature, particularly, forests, were central to the localized communal lifestyle of many communities in India. The indigenous lives and land practice was largely left unrestricted until colonial law forced many communities to abandon ancient practices of coexisting with nature and made use of land restricted or illegal for many indigenous peoples. The British Empire had a profound impact on the global environment since its foundation and its mission was complete control and access to natural resources, making the alteration of the environment central to imperialism. Due to the wide reaching influence of empire expansion, and the subsequent diverse environment converted for productive use, colonization created environmental changes that had never been experienced before in human history.

There was an emphasis on commercialization of agriculture that adversely affected the Habitat and wildlife by the clear cutting of forests and the building of dams that changed the natural landscape. Further, it was the introduction of large scale game hunting, which was considered to be a popular past-time of the British elite, not only interfered with the farming but also had a profound impact on the wildlife in many parts of India.

Colonists were highly critical of many native land practices of agriculture, such as *jhum*, the small scale slash and burning or turning techniques that provided nutrients to farmable soil, and banned its use as barbaric. Many women saw their property rights decrease over their ancestrally inherited forest land which was commonly owned. These projects in economizing the land lead to large scale deforestation, habitat destruction, famine through monoculture crop disease, and loss of wildlife biodiversity. Realizing the commercial importance of the forests, the British enacted the *Madras Forest Act of 1882*.

Till 1970s there was no environmental question. There was only an agrarian question. Environmental issues surfaced as large dams and centralized irrigation systems became politically controversial. If we look into the role of women in environmental protection in the recent decades, we find how women in a developing country like India took up an environmental challenge by participating in an ecological movement like *Chipko* movement and thereby have come out as the most ardent activists for protecting the planet and the lives of its inhabitants. It is important to mention here that it is *Chipko* that marked the advent of an environmental sensibility among upper class urban Indians and introduced a generation to the notion that the 'red' and the 'green' issues were inseparable; its gains were reaped in the decade of the 1990s with the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*.

Relationship Between The Women And The Nature

Throughout history men have considered both women and nature as subordinate entities. This common subordination has given birth to a very close relation between the women and the environment. Women in India are considered to be an intimate part of nature. At one level nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance. Maria Mies, one of the leading ecofeminist, has called women's work in producing sustenance, the production of life and views it as truly productive relationship to nature, because women not only collected and consumed what grew in nature but they

also made things grow. This organic process of growth in which women and nature work in partnership with each other has created a special relationship of women with nature. Only the producers of life can be its real protectors. In developing countries like India, especially in the rural communities, it is the women who perform most of the duties related to farming, food processing, water and fuel procurement, animal husbandry, water disposal and household management. A typical rural woman works 12 to 15 hours a day gathering fire wood and water, growing food, collecting fodder, tending domestic animals, cooking, cleaning and caring for children, the sick and the elderly. Women also depend upon firewood for their needs. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, who are credited as leading ecofeminists, provides in their work an excellent working definition and description of ecofeminism. Generally speaking, ecofeminism makes a link between the oppression of the earth and the oppression of women, recognizing both as violently exploited and controlled. Vandana Shiva also attributes the existing forms of destruction of nature and oppression of women principally to the third world's history of colonialism and to the imposition of western science and western model of development. The recent ecological movements have shown that women are more sensitive towards environment and its problems and have created a special value system about environmental issues which can be discussed as below.

Women And The Ecological Movements

The direct concern of Indian women with environment protection can be traced long back to 1731 A.D, when Amrita Bai of Khejaralli village of Jodhpur District of Rajasthan sacrificed her life for saving the trees of her village. She is considered to be the actual founder of the modern *Chipko* Movement. In order to save the trees, she embraced the trees and was cut as per the orders of the then Maharaja. Her three daughters and later her husband came forward and one by one 363 people were killed and as a result of this, the trees remained untouched because of villager's strong resistance. This movement started by Amrita Bai in 1731 A.D was revived later by Bachni Devi and Gaura Devi of Uttar Pradesh in 1972. They snatched the axe from the wood cutters and warned the contractors not to cut the trees. They gave a song which meant forests bear soil, water and air which are basic requirements of our life.

The *Chipko* and *Appiko* Movements were the grassroots and protesting movements against government sponsored deforestation. *Mahila Mandals* (Women's Groups) took the lead in growing trees and fodder grasses to meet their household needs. They also participated actively in the afforestation programme and in the management of natural resources. Save Silent Valley was the another grassroots and protesting movement against a hydroelectric project that would have caused mass deforestation and habitat destruction. Similarly, Save *Narmada* was a collective organizing group preventing series of dams being built on the Narmada River. All these were thriving and successful environmental activist groups during the late 1990's that were openly against government and intuitional ecological destruction with the acknowledgment of colonial legacy. The *Navdanya* Movement, also known as 'the nine seeds movement,' has been identified both as a women's and environmental movement, was founded by Dr. Vandana Shiva with a decolonial framework. The goal of this movement was to promote traditional and indigenous knowledge to protect biodiversity, spread ecological awareness, empower communities to live in harmony with nature, and provide healthy seeds, foods, and soil rehabilitation to local communities and farmers. Participation regardless of gender, caste, religion, ethnic group, etc. is encouraged and particular emphasis is given to empowering women globally through "Diverse Women for Diversity" to strengthen their grassroots movements under common international platforms. Specifically, ensuring women's food security and protesting against unsustainable and destructive globalization practices is the goal of this section of *Navdanya*.

Feminists all over the world have embraced the environmental challenge after the 1992 Earth Summit held in Rio which emphasized the central role of women in promoting ecologically sound sustainable development. Throughout the world, studies were launched to understand and elucidate the various contributions of women in conservation of natural resources-as custodians of nature and knowledge pertaining to the management of natural resources. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) which was the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing in September 1995 stressed upon involving women actively in environmental decision making at all levels. Environmentalists like R.Guha and P. Mohai are of the view that women's concerns of the environment have not been systematically studied because of the inadequacy of empirical data on gender and environment in India, despite the presence of ideological debate over the issue for a considerable period of time.

It is quite apparent that the environmental movements in India, particularly Vandana Shiva's soil and farming movement and the *Chipko* anti-deforestation movement have been the most successful ecofeminist movements in the country. Ecofeminism could provide the crucial link in advancing 'women and environmental rights' in India since there is an understanding that both these areas suffered the same trauma from the same colonial source and it would be appreciable to find solutions to these problems on a united front. Thus, working for the advancement for one would automatically go hand in hand with the other. This united fight against the same enemy would allow for increased accountability from the government officials and the demand for change from these interest groups would make it harder to perpetuate the colonial legacy.

An ecological perspective has been growing with *STRI Mukti Sangharsh*, an autonomous women's organization in which women refused to break stones at Employment Guarantee Scheme works since that would have no impact on Draught mitigation, demanding agriculturally productive works instead. A new slogan *Hirvi Dharti, Stri Shakti Manav Mukti* (Green Earth, women's power, human liberation) began to be used. They are now working with Bombay based organization of engineers and scientists in projects aimed at making rural women as a core part of the development of alternative technology and alternative agriculture. These days NGOs have also been playing a vital role in raising environmental concerns, developing awareness of environmental issues and promoting sustainable development. The work done by these organizations is difficult to ignore and has won immense appreciation and credibility in present times. They have emerged as the major players in development and conservation activities at the International, National and Regional Level. There are NGOs like *Kalpavriksh*, *Narmada Bachao Andolan*, *Navdanya* and World Wide Fund for Nature in India, which have been promoting conservation of nature and environmental protection for sustainable and equitable development. They have also been emphasizing on conducting research on environmental problems to evolve a holistic environmental perspective. It was because of the good work taken up by NGO like *Sarathi* that the wastelands were developed and put to good use.

Conclusion And Sugesstions

After going through the above discussion and looking at women's role in the ecological movements we have reached a conclusion that women have been contributing substantially towards sustainable development and maintaining essential ecological processes and life support systems by preserving biological diversity and ensuring the sustainable utilization of species and ecosystems. At present, the torchbearers of the environmental movement in India are Maneka Gandhi, an environmentalist & politician and Medha Patekar, a social worker & environmentalist, who are carrying on the crusade of environment protection with vigor and enthusiasm. However, the problem of present day environment protection cannot be solved with the involvement of a few selected groups of women; it requires a global involvement of the entire community of womenfolk

today. There is need of participation of every woman of every class / every locality, and any woman should not underestimate her role in the entire process. In the end, we can say that there is a need to strengthen the roots of the Environmental Movement for increasing the participation of the women. We have seen that the role played by the local women in conservation has been little recognized by the environmental organizations. There is a need to strengthen the indigenous efforts for providing women with adequate resource and credit. Legislation is an essential instrument of policy which needs to be enforced to support the implementation of development policies and plans designed to mainstream both environmental and gender concerns. Strengthening women's legal capacity would require the enforcement of legislation guaranteeing their rights and access to land and other natural resources. The ratification, implementation, enforcement and monitoring of domestic legislation relating to *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* should be the priority. It is equally important to promote Legal Literacy relating to this convention and to international environmental conventions. There is an urgent need to develop women's human resource capabilities through education, training, and access to productive resources and employment which is possible through the enhancement of their legal rights and their increased participation in the decision making. Moreover, there is a need to emphasize on expansion of women's training opportunities in scientific and technological fields. Women's environmental activities, organizations and movements hold the key to sustainable development in countries like India. Their efforts could be further strengthened through gender sensitive planning and major efforts at the national and international levels to arrest the declining trends of environmental degradation and poverty.

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