



AN INVESTIGATION OF ECO-FEMINISM IN THE REALM OF POLICY STUDIES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the complex connection between Indian women and conserving the environment, specifically highlighting their significant contribution to the management of natural resources and the obstacles they face in this area. The research problem seeks to investigate the level of commitment exhibited by Indian women towards environmental sustainability, taking into account the varied cultural and ecological contexts in India. This study adopts a qualitative methodology, utilising existing literature, case studies such as the Chipko Movement, and ecofeminist views to examine the participation of Indian women in environmental movements. The results emphasise the crucial role that Indian women play in protecting natural resources and advancing environmental sustainability, which is deeply based in their cultural and religious beliefs. The implications include the need to acknowledge and enhance the involvement of women in environmental policies and programmes in order to promote a more comprehensive and sustainable approach.

KEY TERMS: *Indian women, conservation of the environment, ecofeminism, cultural beliefs, gender equality, environmental regulations.*

INTRODUCTION

The intricate relationship between women and the environment has been a subject of interest and research in various disciplines. In India, this relationship is particularly significant due to the country's diverse cultural, social, and economic landscapes. Indian women, especially in rural areas, have a direct and profound connection with natural resources, which they utilize for fulfilling the basic needs of their families. This study aims to explore the dedication of Indian women towards environmental conservation, their role in managing natural resources, and the challenges they face in this endeavour.

India, with its wide array of habitats and abundant natural resources, has encountered various environmental issues. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that Indian women have played a substantial part in the conservation and safeguarding of the environment. (Trivedi, 2012)

Their commitment to environmental sustainability and their deep connection to nature may be traced back to the cultural and spiritual foundations of Indian culture. Indian women possess a profound comprehension of the ecological system and a strong sense of responsibility towards nature, which is deeply rooted in their cultural and spiritual beliefs.

They have taken a prominent role in campaigns such as the Chipko Movement, where they physically hugged trees to prevent deforestation, and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, when they battled for the rights of rivers and communities affected by dam construction. The noteworthy role played by Indian women in promoting environmental sustainability and protecting natural resources cannot be overlooked.

Meaning of Ecofeminism

One school of thought that has sprung from feminism is ecofeminism, often known as ecological feminism. The French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne popularised the word "ecofeminism" in 1974, and it gained traction in the



environmental movements of the 1980s and late 1970s. Currently, Ecofeminism has emerged as a prominent focus within the field of gender studies. It is progressively expanding the scope of research in this specific field.

Ecofeminism promotes the notion that both men and women should engage in a non-hierarchical reconceptualization of the world. The foundation of the partnership between the environmental and feminist movements is the shared commitment to egalitarian and decentralised structures. The emancipation of women and nature are unquestionably regarded as inextricably linked.

Ecofeminism advocates for both males and females to participate in a non-hierarchical reinterpretation of the universe. The conservation and feminist movements have formed an alliance rooted in a shared commitment to decentralised and egalitarian frameworks. Without a doubt, the liberation of women and the preservation of the environment are seen as closely linked. (Anjum,2020).

Bina Agarwal (2007) articulates ecofeminism's core beliefs. There is a significant link between dominating and exploiting nature. Second, patriarchal thought links women to nature and men to culture. The belief that nature is inferior to culture leads to the belief that women are inferior to men. The dominance and subjugation of nature and women have occurred together. Fourth, the feminist and environmental movements must collaborate for a more equal and just society. Both movements share similarities and can lead to shared perspectives, practices, and theories. According to Agarwal, the eco-feminist movement has an ideological foundation that identifies the root cause of women's subordination and dominance in existing systems of ideas, practices, and representations. The link between a tortured and exploited environment and a subordinated sex emerged in the West. To establish a viable action theory, ecofeminism needed to address cross-cultural disputes and issues, leading to the formation of different strands of thinking. This was a response to large-scale ecological movements in underdeveloped nations, where the connection between nature and women was emphasised.

Ecofeminism in India: A Closer Look

Ecofeminism in India is a developing discussion that integrates environmental issues with feminist viewpoints, emphasising the interrelated subjugation of women and nature within patriarchal structures. This blend of feminism and ecology examines the societal structures that restrict women and nature and promotes their emancipation from oppressive ideas.

In Indian literature, ecofeminism is depicted as a reaction to the simultaneous subjugation of women and nature. It calls for the substitution of patriarchal structures with feminine principles and recognises the woman-nature relationship as a cultural concept that requires emancipation. (Dasthagiri & Ankanna, 2022). Ecofeminists in India, who share patriarchal oppression and perceive a strong connection between women and nature, highlight the significance of gender in the political economy of environmental issues.

In India, there is a rising wave of protests against the devastation of the environment, as well as ongoing fights for life and subsistence. These issues are closely interconnected with caste, class, and gender dynamics (Rao, 2012). Pioneering eco-feminism studies in India are influenced by the Chipko movement and eco-primitivism, which views local populations as better eco-managers. Studies have recorded many facets of women's involvement in the movement, highlighting this trend. Anupama Mishra and Satyandra Tripathi's 1978 study on the Chipko Movement shines light on rural women's role in protecting trees in Uttarakhand woods. This book meticulously analyses the struggle and highlights the bravery of rural women in Uttarakhand in protecting trees from forest contractors. Vandana Shiva, a pioneer in eco-feminist studies in India, wrote extensively about the Chipko movement. In *Staying Alive*, the author argues that women's participation in the Chipko movement is linked to nature, highlighting the need for sensitive policies to empower women through natural resource management (Shiva, 1988).

Krishna (2009) emphasises that the gender perspective encompasses more than just a focus on women's viewpoints about environmental issues. Emphasising the Bankura project, she contends that if women gain greater authority over the tangible resources and production methods, as well as their own work, they will be well equipped to adapt to the modifications brought about by India's recent economic policies. She posits that the involvement of women in environmental movements and activities will result in their empowerment.

Eco-feminism in policy studies of India

Women residing in informal settlements in South Asia, such as India, experience a higher degree of negative impact from environmental degradation and climate change compared to men. Furthermore, their level of



empowerment is lower than that of men. The factors contributing to this disempowerment are diverse, but they are interconnected with environmental degradation and climate change. (Patel et al., 2020). Environmental policies in India sometimes view women as either saviours, victims, or the issue, with varying policy ramifications. Government has recognised that women manage their environment daily and had different resource needs than men. Redesigned social forestry initiatives acknowledge gender differences in tree product choices, with men seeking timber for construction and fencing and women seeking fodder and fuel wood. Female representation in water and sanitation committees and facility maintenance is becoming more common. Indian wasteland development programmes, like Bankora in West Bengal, have supported women's group efforts to recover forests and increase land productivity. They also use women's advantages in using communal property versus privatised lands. Women are targeted by policies in community forestry, social forestry, water management, and sustainable agriculture.

There is an increasing recognition that in order for policies to be more effective in the developing world, they must embrace a participatory approach. NGOs are crucial in serving as pressure groups in shaping and executing legislation, as well as promoting women's involvement in very hierarchical societies. Public policies have been decentralised to allow for the involvement of local stakeholders.

The study conducted by Jahgnani & Mahadevan in 2023 examines the correlation between women in leadership positions and their impact on environmental results. By analysing satellite data obtained from India, this study examines the occurrence of crop fires in seats where women narrowly won or lost elections against men. The findings reveal that female legislators had a significant impact in reducing crop fire incidence and lowering particle emissions. An investigation aimed at comprehending the underlying processes indicates that women in leadership positions are more inclined to view crop fires as a significant concern, evaluate their effects on child health, and enforce policies for managing crop residue.

The study conducted by Jewitt, S., & Baker, K.A. (2009) investigates the intricate spatial dynamics of environmental knowledge ownership and authority in the regions of Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh. The study concludes that there is a need for development initiatives that are flexible and sensitive to gender, and that are individual to each site. These initiatives should aim to create possibilities for women to have better access to agricultural and forest-based spaces, and to make use of their knowledge in agro-ecology. The paper emphasises the need to address the absence of discussions among policymakers regarding the essentialization of women. This lack of dialogue can result in misguided policy decisions that perpetuate the belief in generalised behavioural differences between genders, while overlooking the challenges women encounter in acquiring environmental knowledge and engaging in development initiatives.

An overview of key environmental policies and programmes and their impact on women.

The National Environment Policy (2006) acknowledges that our diversified developing society presents various difficulties in the economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental domains. All of these factors converge in the primary objective of reducing widespread poverty, measured in terms of several aspects such as ensuring stable livelihoods, providing healthcare and education, empowering marginalised individuals, and eliminating gender inequalities.

The National Forest Policy 1988 and Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme in the 1990s required 33% of Vana Samarakshana Samitis membership to be women. The success of the programme in many states is largely due to the inclusion of women. The idea was to address deforestation by partnering with local communities to reforest degraded forests through joint management agreements with state Forest Departments.

The Biodiversity Act of 2002 recognises the significant role that women play as stakeholders and are responsible for the preservation of traditional knowledge. In farming societies throughout history, women have always held the role of seed keepers.

Water harvesting programmes in India witness a higher participation of women who collaborate with the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Water exhibits gender elements. Women and men experience distinct advantages from the availability, utilisation, and administration of it. Women played an active role in the Sukhomajri village located in the Shivalik range of the Himalayas in Haryana. Their effective use of forests and water resources garnered them widespread recognition. The community reaps benefits when women participate in water management decisions. The Gujarat Water Policy (2002) also acknowledges that women are



the primary stakeholders in rural water supply, domestic urban water consumption, health and sanitation, and agricultural production. It recognises the significant role that local women play in grassroots water management.

Rural renewable energy plans target women in families equipped with biogas plants and solar cookers/panels. It is imperative that impoverished women have access to clean and sustainable cooking energy. Policymakers must acknowledge the significance of women in the energy industry and actively involve them in policy formulation and project planning. Energy policies and programmes that acknowledge the contributions and responsibilities of women in the energy sector can effectively enhance the availability of sustainable energy alternatives.

CONCLUSION

The Indian environmental movement encompasses several social struggles over scarce natural resources. Over the past two decades, it has risen dramatically and reflects village or large-scale confrontations involving many people. The environmental movement has many voluntary groups focused on activities that harm the environment and impoverish local communities, such as dams, mining, mechanised fishing, commercial agriculture, and forest destruction. However, this lively environmental movement is primarily defensive. It has not questioned the socio-political mechanisms causing ecological degradation and has not contributed to development policy debates.

Future forecasts suggest that women are expected to experience significant and enduring consequences from the extensive effects of environmental degradation. In order to effectively tackle these difficulties, it is necessary to transition from conventional categorizations of health, gender, and environment to proactive solutions that are inclusive of all genders. Policymakers should give primary importance to women's health and utilise their capacity to address, adjust to, and tackle environmental issues. (Alam, 2024).

This study has explored the involvement of women in environmental movements, with a specific focus on India. India has a well-documented history of women actively participating in environmental matters. The Chipko movement served as a catalyst for several similar movements led by women, such as the Green Belt movement in Kenya, the Save the Rainforest campaign in the Amazon, and the Appiko movement in the Western Ghats. Women have a vested interest in preserving the environment as they rely on it not just for their means of living, but also for the everyday necessities of their households, such as water, fuelwood, and fodder. Gender disparity is prevalent in India, as indicated by the significant male dominance in land and property ownership. Women involved in social movements are actively working to rectify this disparity. Women play a crucial role in driving change in environmental challenges, not just as victims but also as active agents. The omission of women in policy is connected to the gender politics that favour men and render women unseen. The required inclusion of women in local government bodies has resulted in a gradual but noticeable increase in the number of grassroots women participating. Women currently oversee and control shared resources, such as forests, grasslands, energy, seeds, water, soil, and sustainable agriculture. Women possess the potential to be influential participants in the transition towards a more environmentally conscious future, and it is imperative for policymakers to acknowledge this fact. There should be a transition from solely emphasising women as a target of policy to a more sophisticated consideration of gender in the development of any policy.

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