



Study of women's participation in the environmental movement in India

Syed Manuaruz Zaman

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Hiralal Bhakat College, West Bengal, India

Abstract

Women play a crucial role in environmental protection, managing family resources, and collecting water and fuel from nature. Women's movements like India's Chipko and Kenya's Green Belt movement have contributed significantly to environmental protection. Environmentalist activists like, Vandana Shiva, Sunita Narraine, Sumaira Abdulali, Kinkari Devi, Medha Patkar, and Menaka Gandhi have also contributed to environmental protection. The 42nd Amendment Act of 1976 mandates the protection and improvement of the natural environment. The Indian government has adopted policies and programs that include women as decision-makers in environmental policies, increasing women's participation and awareness.

Keywords: Environmental movement, women, water resource, grassroots level, gender

Introduction

India, often viewed as the mother of the earth, has been aggressively exploiting its natural environment due to overpopulation and technological advancements. This has led to the exploitation of natural resources and the emergence of environmentalist movements worldwide. Although the environmental movement in India has its recent origins, it has intensified rapidly in recent decades. Women, who are closely connected to nature and are responsible for managing households and conserving resources, play a significant role in raising voices against environmental degradation. Despite being considered a weaker section of society, women play a significant role in raising awareness against environmental degradation through education and technology advancements. They are largely visible in the movement against deforestation and conserving water resources. Some of the most important environmental movements in India are led by women, highlighting the importance of women in the fight against environmental degradation.

Objectives

The study aims to explore the history of women's involvement in environmental movements, understand India's environmental movements, and analyze government policies and programs relating to women and the environment.

Methodology

The present study has been based on secondary data include Books, journals, newspaper, government records as well as internet source.

The historical role of women in India's environmental movement

Women have played a significant role in environmental conservation, with their participation dating back to 1731 in Rajasthan. Amrita Bai of Khejarali village, near Jodhpur, Rajasthan, was the first woman to embrace the Khejri tree, a sacred tree in the Bishnoi community. This event led to a strong resistance and the establishment of the first environmental movement globally.

The first ecological movements began in 1917 in Bihar, led by Mahatma Gandhi, against British plantation cultivation without payment. In 1930, Gandhiji led the Salt Satyagraha movement against British Salt tax monopoly. However, women mostly participated in urban areas. In the 1970s, women from rural India began to take the front. The Chipko Movement in Chamoli district in Uttarakhand in 1972, led by Sundarlal Bahuguna and Bachni Devi and Gaura Devi, played a significant role. The Silent Valley Movement in 1978, led by Sughatha Kumari, was against hydroelectric projects to conserve the evergreen forest.

The Navdanya movement, started by Vandana Shiva in 1982, promoted biodiversity and engaged women. The Aapiko movement in 1983, led by villagers in Uttara Kannada district, showed a large number of rural women participations. Narmada Bachao Andolan, launched in 1989, was another significant environmental movement where women played a pivotal role. Currently, numerous environmental activists are working for environmental protection and conservation, including Padma Shri award winner Sunita Narain, Jamuna Tadu, and Radha Bhatt. These activists focus on sustainable development, climate change, and protecting the environment.

The Bishnoi Movement, a first-ever environmental movement in India, began in 1731 when women in Khejarli, Marwar, Rajasthan, embraced the sacred Khejri trees cut down by a king's soldier for a new palace. The Bishnois community considered these trees sacred and proclaimed that a chopped head was cheaper than a felled tree. Amrita Devi, leading the movement, and other villagers lost their lives to protect the trees. The king eventually stopped the operation and designated Bishnoi as a protected area, which remains unchanged today.

In 1973, the Chamoli District in Uttarakhand was allotted an entire ash tree to the Simon Company for commercial purposes, despite villagers' petitions for agricultural tools. The Chipko movement, led by Sundarlal Bahuguna, Gura Devi, and Sudesha Devi, involved local women hugging the trees from loggers. Gaura Devi called the trees her "maika" and invited them to shoot them instead of harming

the forest. Sudesha Devi spearheaded the women's drive to protect the Rampur forest from contractors. The movement helped women organize themselves and make their own decisions. After protests, the government canceled the company's permit and granted it to the villagers.

Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) is an environmental movement in India that began in 1985 against the Sardar Sarovar Dam project. The project would build 30 major, 135 medium, and 3000 small dams over the Narmada river, displacing 3,20,000 tribals and submerging over 37,000 hectares of forest and agricultural land. Under Medha Patkar's leadership, NBA organized a Gandhian protest of non-violence, resulting in a satyagraha and hunger strike. The World Bank funded the project, but withdrew it in 1993 after protests.

In 1976, an ecological movement in Palakkad, Kerala, led by Malayalam poet and environmentalist Sugatha Kumari, aimed to preserve the Silent Valley biodiversity hotspot. The movement opposed the construction of a dam for a hydroelectric project, which would submerge the entire evergreen forest. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi called off the project, and it was declared a National Park in 1985.

Programs and Policies for Women and Environmental Protection

Environmental policies are adopted at both national and international levels, with India being among the countries with the highest number of policies and programs developed by the government, NGO's, and individuals. Women, who constitute half of the population, are crucial for the overall growth of the country. To empower women, the Indian government has implemented various environmental programs, including the Environmental Gender Index (EGI), which ranks countries on gender equality and women's empowerment in the environmental arena. The National Forest Policy 1988 and Joint Forest Management (JFM) program of the 1990s mandated that women comprise 33% of the membership of the Vana Samarakshana Samitis, aiming to manage deforestation through joint management agreements with local communities. The National Policies for Women 2016 also prioritize women's rights and participation in environment-friendly technologies, promoting organically grown produce for livelihood options.

Efforts are being made to recognize women's rights using forest products under the Forest Rights Act and strengthen their roles in forest governance. Emphasis is placed on women's role as stakeholders and custodians of traditional knowledge, as they have been the seed keepers in farming communities.

All India Radio and National Television broadcast various programs about environmental protection, and environmental education has become a part of the education system, raising awareness among people, including women, about their duty to protect the environment.

Eco feminism is a social and political movement that unites environmentalism and feminism, with some currents linking deep ecology and feminism. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva argue that a relationship exists between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature, exploring the intersectionality between sexism, dominance of nature, racism, species, and other characteristics of social equality. Since the early 1970s, there has been considerable interest in the relationship between low-income rural women in developing countries and the environment, as they are the

main users and providers of household biomass and subsistence needs.

Women are more susceptible to the effects of climate change than men, as they represent the majority of the world's poor and are more reliant on natural resources that are vulnerable by drastic climate change. They also face social, economic, and political barriers that limit their coping competence. Eco-feminist writer activists like Wangari Maathai's The Green Belt Movement and Vandana Shiva's Navadanya aim to empower women in the conservation and preservation of the environment, often playing a stronger role than men in managing eco system services and food security. The 'Chipko' movement in India, which originated from ancient Indian cultures, aims to protect precious fuel resources for communities. Women in the 1970s revived these Chipko actions to accumulate their forests for fuel wood and protect their valleys from corrosion due to cash cropping.

Eco-feminism connects the exploitation and domination of women with that of the environment, aiming for emancipation of women as women. Other women who have led environmental causes and movements include Medha Patkar, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, and C.K Janu. Vandana Shiva's work focuses on embracing not only the principles of feminism but also the principles of ecology, seeing the world view that causes environmental degradation and injustice as the same that causes a culture of male domination, exploitation, and inequality for women.

Conclusion

Since ancient times, women have been instrumental in environmental protection due to their connection to nature, household work, and household issues. They are more active in environmental protection than men, leading movements like the Chipko, Bishnoi, and Green Belt movements. Environmentalist activists like Greta Thunberg, Jane Goodall, Medha Patkar, Kinkari Devi, and Vandhana Shiva are also involved in environmental protection. Women's efforts are more successful when supported by other societal groups, making collaboration between women and other groups crucial for environmental protection and improvement.

The World Bank estimates that environmental degradation costs around 5.7% of a country's GDP annually. Women have played a crucial role in conserving and protecting the environment, often through tree-hugging or long-term hunger strikes. Women are close to nature and are considered symbols of kindness and love. They understand the pain of harming their children and the earth when plants and rivers are damaged. Development is necessary, but it should not come at the cost of the environment. Development is fruitless without lives, and without the environment, no life can exist. It is essential to prioritize women's involvement in decision-making processes and gender-sensitive environmental policies.

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