

## **A role of women globally in Environmental Protection**

**J. D. Sonkhaskar**

Department of Politics, KSKW ASC College, CIDCO, Nashik-422008, India.

\*Corresponding Author Email:- patkare@rediffmail.com

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### **Abstract**

In ancient time it had been considered that ladies haven't any role in environmental protection and conservation. Though Women are liable for utilization of those resources to fulfill the essential needs of their families. Women play a critical role in managing natural resources on family and community levels and are most suffering from environmental degradation. In communities round the world, women manage water, sources for fuel, and food, also as both forests and agricultural terrain. India's Chipko movement and Kenya's Green Belt Movement are the example of high level to the grassroots, the 1992 UN Earth Summit, all highlighted the role of women's voices and perspectives in sustainable development. Similarly, now –a-days Medha Patekar, a social worker, Menaka Gandhi, an environmentalist and politician are working hard for the conservation and protection of the environment. Therefore, conservation of natural resources and promotion of environment can't be avoided involving women for inculcate the values of conservation and proection of environment. Women do the planting, weeding and harvesting and are the keepers of biodiversity. Women are more concerned with the immediate, local micro levels of lifestyle and hence feel the impact of a degraded environment more. Women in India are largely visible within the movements against deforestation and in conserving water. Women are active agents of conservation and restoration. In fact, evidence reveals that there's a correlation between environment and gender; when gender inequality is high, forest depletion, pollution and other measures of environmental degradation also are high

**Key words:** women, environment, role, protection

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### **Introduction**

“Advancing gender equality, through reversing the varied social and economic handicaps that make women voiceless and powerless, can also be one among the simplest ways of saving the environment.” —Amartya Sen, (1998) written in his Nobel Laureate in Economics Women in

different parts of the world are actively involved in saving the environment, but there is still limited recognition of their contribution. If sustainable development is a goal of the global community, the role of women in achieving this has to be underscored. The Millennium Development Goals include both, gender equality and environmental sustainability. Involving women in protecting the environment would help societies develop the sense of responsibility needed to require care of an honest balance between humans and thus the earth's resources. Social movements across the world have drawn attention to a wide range of issues facing society. The women's movement and the environmental movement share a close association as discussed earlier, in the concept of Ecofeminism. With growing evidence of the environmental crisis, the focus on women as agents of change has intensified. Global environmental agencies and institutions now increasingly admit to the key role women play in conservation and protection of environment. Women and Global Environmental Movements Women's role in environmental movements differs from the developed to the developing world. In the developed countries the issues that women are raising are largely related to pollution and the urban context, while in the developing countries the issues are linked to livelihood concerns in rural areas.

This paper has discussed the role of women in environmental movements, particularly in India. It is evident that India has a long history of the involvement of women in environmental causes. In fact, the Chipko movement spearheaded many such movements by women to save the forests, like Green Belt in Kenya, Save the Rainforest in the Amazon and Appiko in the Western Ghats. Women have a stake in conserving environment as they depend on it not just for livelihood but also for daily needs of the household (water, fuelwood and fodder). Gender inequality exists quite sharply in India, as evident from the fact that ownership of land and property is largely with men.

Women in movements are fighting to correct this imbalance. Women are not just victims, but also key agents of change in environmental issues. The exclusion of women in policies is related to the gender politics that privilege men and make women invisible. This is now changing slowly with the mandatory representation of women in local government bodies that has seen a surge in membership of grassroots women. Women now collectively manage common resources, whether it is forests, grasslands, energy, seeds, water, soil or sustainable agriculture. Women can be key players in the move towards a more sustainable future and policy makers need to realise this.

There needs to be shift from a mere focus on women as an object of policy, to a more nuanced engagement with gender in the framing of any policy.

### **Objectives of the paper**

This paper presents an overview of the role of women in environmental movements globally, and more specifically in India. It looks at some major environmental movements in India that were spearheaded by women. The paper will emphasise the important contribution of women in the environmental movement across the world.

### **Research Methodology**

The present research paper is predicted on secondary data. Various references, journals and books have been used for the preparation of the research paper.

### **Role of women globally other than India**

There are many examples of women writing/ fighting to save the environment. One of the first well known environmentalists was Rachel Carson, whose concern for the environment was voiced in her seminal book, 'Silent Spring' in 1962. Carson warned about the dangers of using chemical pesticides, particularly DDT, as it has serious effects on human health. Many see Carson as the mother of the environmental movement through the questions she raised in her book. Carson paved the way for women to come together to protect the environment. Another strong voice was that of Elinor Ostrom who pointed out that depriving communities of the access to natural resources is not the most efficient way of managing our have a gender perspective. Global inheritance. In her book 'Governing the Commons' (1990) she gave the world a map to a more just and sustainable way of managing resources through collective action. Attempts to save the environment have been made by a wide range of women, from 'housewives' to 'scientists'. In 1978, a 27 year old housewife Lois Gibbs discovered that her child was attending an elementary school built next to a 20,000 ton, toxic-chemical dump in Niagara Falls, New York. Desperate to do something about it, she organized her neighbors into the Love Canal Homeowners Association and a movement was born. In December 1997, a 23-year-old woman named Julia "Butterfly" Hill climbed a 55-meter (180 foot) tall California Coast Redwood tree. Her aim was to prevent the destruction of the tree and of the forest where it had grown. She stayed on the tree for two years and came down in December 1999. This two year long protest action by one woman saved the tall Redwoods in the California forest. Brazil is a country rich in

biological diversity, but also high in habitat destruction. One-third of the world's forests lie in Brazil. More than a fifth of the world's freshwater supply is in Brazil's rivers. Brazil boasts the world's largest river, the Amazon, and the world's largest tropical forest, the Amazon forest. The destruction of forests in Brazil has seen a rise in environmental movements. Between 1990 and 2009, Brazil's federal created 89 extractive and sustainable development reserves in Amazonia, encompassing 24 million hectares. The conceptual underpinning of these reserves – sustainable and multiple-use forest management – are daily put into practice by thousands of rural Amazonian women. The Secretariat of Women Extractivists of CNS helped to transform women's roles in resource management. They helped women work across sectors, in cultivation of ties with the State, capacity building, thus providing a strong foundation for an increasing role of Amazonian women to promote sustainable forest management and conservation. Another example of a women environmentalist in Brazil is of Marina Silva, a colleague of Chico Mendes, who was assassinated for defending the Amazon environment. Marina Silva continues the fight to save the Amazon forests. In Asia, women are active in environmental movements related to a range of issues. Rural peasant women in Thailand as well as in other countries, have contributed in big ways to movements to defend the environment and natural resources. Forests in Thailand declined from 53% in 1961 to 29% in 1985. A large part in restoring forests through afforestation, was played by peasant Thai women. Dhamma Rakhsa Reforestation Program in Thailand, saw women restoring forests and developing new sources of income linked to reforestation and sustainable agriculture. Thai women are also coming together to protest against eucalyptus plantations and shrimp cultivation. In China, Dai Qing a journalist, has been part of a movement protesting the Three Gorges Dam Project on the Yangtze river, one of the largest dam projects in the world. She has been imprisoned for her writings against the dam. Japanese women have been part of local movements against pollution because of their concern for the health of their families, especially for their children. Japanese women also played a key role in the campaign against mercury poisoning by the Chisso Corporation (a fertilizer company) in Minamata (Kyushu) because most men in that region were on the Chisso payroll and therefore could not challenge the company without endangering their livelihood. The Minamata campaign in the 60s exposed the dangers of mercury poisoning and forced industries to treat effluents before releasing them into seas, rivers and lakes. One of the most well known environmental

movements globally and in Africa is the Green Belt movement. This is an indigenous grassroots non-governmental organization based in Nairobi, Kenya that takes a holistic approach to development by that concentrate on environmental conservation, community development and capacity building.. The Green Belt Movement was founded by Wangari Maathai in 1977 to reply to the requirements of rural Kenyan women who reported that their streams were dehydration , their food supply was less secure, and that they had to steer further and further to urge firewood for fuel and fencing. The movement 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. The Green Belt Movement drew some of its inspiration from the Chipko movement of India. Wangari Maathai its founder was awarded in 1986 the Right Livelihood Award, and in 2004 she became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

**Role of women in India** Women's Movements in India Environmental movements in India though of recent origin, have intensified in the last few decades and are raising a wide range of questions. Harsh Se thi (a leading scholar on environmental issues) divides the environmental struggles in India, into five categories:

- (1) Forest based—forest policy, use of forest resources, etc.
- (2) land use— industrialization and loss of agriculture and, indiscriminate popularization of chemical inputs resulting in degradation of land and waterlogging, exploitation of mineral resources
- (3) against big dams involving the problem of involuntary displacement of tribals and non-tribals residing in the upstream of the river, environmental degradation including destruction of forests;
- (4) against pollution created by industries; and
- (5) against overexploitation of marine resources.

Movements in India are struggles of the poor – of the dispossessed, the marginalized, the victims of discrimination, Dalits, women, tribals and the small and landless farmers. Most movements are concerned with conserving natural resources to sustain livelihoods. One of the first such ecological movements was that from Champaran district of Bihar in 1917 where people protested against the indigo plantations that were encouraged by the British. Mahatma Gandhi took up the protests and finally the plantations were abolished. Another well-known Gandhian and political

movement in the colonial period, was the Salt Satyagraha which fought for people's access to the common resources of salt pans that were being denied to them. Women began manufacturing and selling salt throughout India. Usha Mehta, an early Gandhian activist, have broken the salt law. (Wikipedia). In both these movements' women played a participative and supportive role. Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu in the Salt Satyagraha These initial movements saw a large number of women participating, but they were largely urban women. It was only from the 1970s that rural women spearheaded the environmental movements.

In rural India, traditionally, women have been responsible for subsistence and survival for water, food, fuel, fodder and habitat. Women's position in the society is governed by the norms of a patriarchal system of social organization. The labor required to boost crops is, however, almost entirely supplied by women. Women do the planting, weeding and harvesting and are the keepers of biodiversity. Women are more concerned with the immediate, local micro levels of everyday life and hence feel the impact of a degraded environment more. Women in India are largely visible in the movements against deforestation and in conserving water. One of the earliest recorded encounters of women protecting their environment can be traced back to 1731 among the Bishnois, who lived in the scrub forests of Rajasthan, near Jodhpur. Amrita Bai of Khejaralli village sacrificed her life for saving the Khejri trees of her village that the Bishnois hold as sacred. In order to save the trees, she embraced the trees, and lost her life as did 363 others from among the Bishnois. As a result the forest was spared due to the strong resistance of the villagers. Amrita Bai and her band of women Bishnois can be considered the first women environmentalists of the world. This movement started by Amrita Bai in 1731 provided the inspiration for Bachni Devi and Gauri Devi of Uttar Pradesh in the Chipko movement of the 1970s. Chipko movement. The emergence of the modern Indian environmental movement can perhaps be dated to 1972, the year the Chipko movement began. The Terai region of Uttarakhand in the Himalayan foothills was a dense forest area that caught the eyes of the timber merchants. Large scale deforestation followed commercial forestry, that saw the hills denuded resulting in loss of top soil and occurrence of landslides and floods. Peasant women living in these areas saw their lives getting harder as it took them much longer to collect the daily needs of fuel wood, fodder and water. Over a period of time these women were able to connect the loss of the forests with the changes in their lives. Thus Chipko born with Bachni Devi and Gauri Devi leading the

protests. The movement began in Chamoli district and spread throughout the Uttarakhand Himalayas by the end of the decade. Rural women came together to save their forests by hugging the trees when the contractors came to fell them. One of Chipko's most salient features was the voluntary mass participation of female villagers. As the backbone of Uttarakhand's Agrarian economy, women were most directly suffering from environmental degradation and deforestation and thus associated with the problems of conservation most easily. Women are seen as more sensitive to forests because they have a more direct relationship with them in these hill areas. The Chipko women were joined by Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhat who gave the movement a direction and publicity at the national level. The Chipko Movement was not a movement just to save forests, rather, it was a movement, concerned with also the maintenance of the traditional ecological balance in the fragile Terai region, where hill people have traditionally enjoyed a positive relationship with their environment. The collective mobilization of women for the cause of preserving forests has raised issues about the present model of development that encouraged commercial forestry in the hill regions. The impact of Chipko movement did not remain confined within the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand. The movement impacted other movements across the country to save forests. The Appiko movement of the 1980s, to save forests in the Uttara Kannada region of Karnataka was inspired by the Chipko movement. The Appiko Andolan brought out a new awareness of environmental conservation in southern India and saw a large number of rural women participating. In 1950, Uttara Kannada district forest covered more than 81 per cent of its geographical area. With development, major industries like pulp and paper mill, a plywood factory and a chain of hydroelectric dams sprouted in the area. These industries overexploited the forest resources, and the dams submerged huge-forest and agricultural areas. By 1980 the forest had shrunk to about 25 per cent of the district's area. The Appiko Movement was a response to this crisis and tries to save the Western Ghats. Most movements have realized the importance of women in environmental protection after the Chipko movement. Important movements that are largely driven by women are Deccan Development Society in Telangana started in the year 1983 that works in sustainable agriculture; Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India, a collective of over two million poor women, working to adopt small-scale clean technologies, such as clean cook stoves and solar lanterns; Navadanya which means 'nine seeds' focuses on

biodiversity and traditional seed banks. All these are women centred movements for the protection of environment, livelihoods and for biological and cultural diversity SEWA in Gujarat, involve and trains women in water harvesting, building capacity to manage and maintain water systems and, educating and creating awareness. Through the establishment of women's collectives at the community level, SEWA could help communities gain access to existing government programmes. Vandana Shiva founded Navadanya in 1982 to encourage traditional farming practices. Navadanya is an organisation promoting biodiversity conservation and organic farming. The organisation has not only helped create markets for farmers, but also promoted quality organic food for consumers. The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) One of India's longest environmental struggles is the NBA that started in the 1985 and continues to this day. The NBA is India's largest mass movement protesting against the construction of huge dams on the Narmada River, the largest river flowing into the Arabian Sea. The proposed Sardar Sarovar Dam and Narmada Sagar will displace more than 250,000 people; submerge over 25 villages and forests. While the anti- dam movement began by protests from small farmers and advises spread across Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, it got a momentum with the coming of Medha Patkar. She formed the NBA in 1989, and has been involved since in the struggles of the people to stall the dam. Under Medha Patkar, the NBA uses Gandhian means to protest, that are non-violent and raises larger questions of the ills of modern development. Critiques of development led displacement inform the NBA and give it wide publicity not only in India but also globally.

Women Environmentalists Some well-known Indian women environmentalists are:

Amrita Devi -- Bishnois Struggle to save Khejri tree • Bachni Devi and Gaura Devi -- Chipko movement • Medha Patkar – Narmada Bachao Aandolan • Sunita Narain -- Centre for Science and Environment • Vandana Shiva – Activist, Navadanya • Aruna Roy – Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) • Rashida Bee and Champa Devi Shukla – Bhopal Gas Tragedy • Maneka Gandhi – Animal Rights activist; Minister in BJP Govt. • Sugatha Kumari – Poet; Silent Valley

There is now available an Environment Gender Index (EGI) that ranks countries on how they are translating gender and environment mandates into national policy and planning. The Scandinavian countries perform very well with high scores of EGI, suggesting an integration of gender concerns into environment policies. Out of 72 countries that were ranked on EGI, India is



ranked 46. In the 1980s, governments and development agencies became far more conscious of the necessity to think about gender issues in their environmental and natural resource management programmes.

**Recommendation:**

- 1) Environmental education should be expanded in rural areas.
- 2) The potential of science and Technology should be utilized to solve environmental related problems and ease women's workload inside and outside the home
- 3) The central government should develop a strategy to eliminate various obstacles constitutional, legal, administrative, social and economic in nature to women's full participation in sustainable development.

**Conclusions**

Understanding women's and men's relationships to the environment plays an important role in framing policies for more sustainable use of natural resources. We need to explore the complex linkages and intersections of gender with policy, politics, environmental exploitation and sustainable resource use globally. Gender sensitive policies are those that seek to achieve environmental outcomes while explicitly taking into account both men's and women's opinions, needs, and interests.

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