

Community Participation In Environmental Conservation And Management: Role of Indian Women

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Abstract

Rapid industrialization, urbanization, growing population and developed science and technology has deteriorated and degraded the biophysical environment around us. Unlimited exploitation of nature has disturbed the ecological balance between living and nonliving components of the biosphere. Women have always had a direct contact with natural resources like fuel, food, fodder, trees, water and land especially in rural areas. Their direct contact with nature and natural resources has educated women and made them brilliant environmentalists, agriculturists, water resource managers and scientists. India has been a pioneer in environmental conservation and women in India have played a crucial role in protection and conservation of environment. Amrita Devi, Vandana Shiva, Maneka Gandhi, Medha Patkar, Sunita Narayan are among the many women who have brought a different perspective to the environment debate. Movements like Chipko and programmers like biodiversity conservation, wild life protection, water conservation etc. have been successfully launched and led by many Indian women. Thus as resource managers, women should be consulted and supported and more women should be involved in decision making with regards to policies, programmers or funding of environmental issues in India. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyses the role of Indian women in protection, conservation and management of environment and recommendations have been suggested regarding the same.

Keywords: Community, Local Governance, Participation, Women, Environmental conservation, management, protection

Introduction

Rapid industrialization, urbanization, growing population and developed science and technology has deteriorated and degraded the biophysical environment around us.

The mad and blind race for development among nations on the globe has jeopardized man himself. This craze has resulted into unlimited exploitation of almost every bit of natural resource. Unlimited exploitation of nature has disturbed the ecological balance between living and non living components of the biosphere. Environmental degradation has become one of the biggest threats that are being looked at on the globe today. It is best described as the reduction of the limit of the earth to meet basic needs of the living beings. At the point when environment gets wrecked and natural resources are exhausted, the environment is considered to be degraded and thus harmed. There can be numerous reasons of environmental degradation and damage, pollution, landfills, deforestation etc.

Hence, it is utmost important to conserve and promote the natural resources and environment. Women have always had a direct contact with natural resources like fuel, food, fodder, trees, water and land especially in rural areas where 70% of the Indian population resides. People here are directly dependent upon natural resources and the responsibility lies in the hands of women who look after these resources to satisfy the basic needs of their families. Women have been the pioneer in maintaining an ecological balance as they have been known to worship trees and plants and using them for various other purposes. Besides, that woman has also played an important role in

Community Participation In Environmental Conservation
And Management: Role of Indian Women

Dr. Jyotsna Jain

conservation and protection of environment. They have set up many examples since Vedic times which have portrayed their role in environmental conservation. Various studies reveal that women have been the major actors in environmental conservation and contributors in the management and rehabilitation of the natural resources. Their direct contact with nature and natural resources has educated women and made them brilliant environmentalists, agriculturists, water resource managers and scientists. Moser (1991) distinguishes between three roles for women:

- As managers or maintainers of the natural environment,
- Rehabilitators of the natural environment in the sense of sustainable development,
- As innovators in the use of appropriate technology in the creation of new environments.

Dank Elman and Davidson (1998) observed that women play a key role in managing their natural surroundings and adopt several mechanisms to deal with the kinds of environmental crisis they face. Looking at the huge involvement of women in protection of environment, there arises a need to understand the various ways women have actively participated in environmental protection and management in India with a view to integrate them into present and future environmental management programs being carried out in the country. Throughout history, women have been immortalized as powerful symbols of nature: Mother Earth, Earth Goddess, and Artemis in the Greek mythology, and Mother River (the Yellow River) in Chinese history. Women have personified nature and they as bearers and conservers of life have proved their strong role in conservation of natural resources so promotion of environment should not be done without involving them in planning and training for conservation and promotion of environment. Ecofeminism refers to women's and feminist perspectives on the environment. Therefore an attempt has been made to assess the role of women in conservation and promotion of environment in India.

Women in India have played a crucial role in protection and conservation of environment, they have brought a different perspective to the environment debate, women's lives are not compartmentalized and they see the issues in much broad and holistic perspective. They understand the importance of environment and know that soil, water and vegetation which are necessary for their day-to-day living, requires good care and proper management.

Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is a term that links feminism with ecology; it describes the feminine instinct for nurturing nature and holistic knowledge of natural resources. The term was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). Women and nature are also united through their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal Western society.

Women were known to participate in the environmental movements, specifically preservation and conservation, much earlier than this. Beginning in the late 20th century, women worked in efforts to protect wildlife, food, air and water and slowly and gradually they became the pioneers in conserving natural resources managing it from the home front and in the early 1970s the beginning of the environmental movement intersections among feminists and other social justice movements emerged. Eco feminists in the 1990s dealt with a lot of criticism Feminist thoughts surrounding ecofeminism still grew in many areas where it contributed intersectional analysis, animal and labour rights analysis and activism. Ecofeminism as it propelled into the 21st century began to emerge more strongly where the Eco feminists carried out various research and started working on queer ecologies, global feminist environmental justice, gender and the environment.

According to philosopher Karen Warren “An ecofeminism ethic is both a critique of male domination of women and nature and an attempt to frame an ethic free of male-gender bias about women and nature. It not only recognizes the multiple voices of women, located differently by race, class, age, [and] ethnic considerations, but it also centralizes those voices. Ecofeminism builds on the multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses, for example Chipko women, in developing a global perspective on the role of male domination in the exploitation of women and nature. An ecofeminist perspective is thereby structurally pluralistic, inclusivist and contextualize, emphasizing through concrete example the crucial role context plays in understanding sexist and naturist practice.”

Ecofeminists and authors like Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies and Evan Bondi ponder modern science and its acceptance as a universal and value-free system and relate the bonding between women and nature. There a list of ecofeminists and theorists who have contributed to ecofeminism and helped in creating an awareness regarding environmental conservation and protection. Few to be named are:

- Karen Warren Françoise d'Eaubonne
- Sallie McFague
- Rosemary Radford Ruether
- Vandana Shiva
- Maria Mies
- Val Plumwood
- Greta Gaard
- Charlene Spretnak
- Starhawk
- Judi Bari Carolyn Merchant
- Mary Mellor
- Ariel Salleh

Indian women pioneer in environmental conservation Amrita Devi

Chipko movement or Chipkoandolan was one of the first environmentalist movements inspired by women in India. The word “Chipko” referred to the “tree-huggers” comes from a Hindi word meaning ‘to stick’. It was a forest conservation movement in India that began in 1973 and went on to become a rallying point for many future environmental movements all over the world. It also created a precedent for non-violent protest to save environment in India. The chipko aandolan was a movement that practised the Gandhian methods of Satyagraha environmental activists, including Gaura Devi, Sudesha Devi, Bachni Devi and Chandi Prasad Bhatt played vital roles. It started in the early 18th century in the state of Rajasthan where Amrita Devi with 84 villagers embraced trees to prevent their felling and risked their lives to protect the forest trees from being felled on the order of the Maharaja of Jodhpur who wanted to build a new palace in Rajasthan.

Vandana Shiva

An Indian scholar, environmental activist, Vandana Shiva has extensively contributed on advances in the fields of agriculture and food. Shiva has carried out activist campaigns in fields of Intellectual property rights, biodiversity, biotechnology, bioethics, and genetic engineering. She is the only Indian to assist grassroots organizations of the Green movement in Africa, Asia, Austria, Ireland, Switzerland and Latin America for agricultural development via genetic engineering.

Community Participation In Environmental Conservation And Management: Role of Indian Women

Dr. Jyotsna Jain

Shiva created Navdanya in 1991, and has led to a national movement for integration and protection of the diversity of living resources, especially native seed, she has also led many programmes for the promotion of organic farming. She is the founder of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology (1982). Shiva and her team has challenged the biopiracy of Neem, Basmati and Wheat.

Vandana Shiva has spent much of her life in the defence and celebration of biodiversity and indigenous knowledge. She has worked to promote biodiversity in agriculture to increase productivity, nutrition, farmer's incomes and climate resilience. Shiva has been involved in arguments that the seed-chemical package promoted by Green Revolution agriculture has depleted fertile soil, destroyed living ecosystems, and negatively impacted people's health and has raised issues regarding the health costs of increasing pesticide and fertiliser use.

Shiva has also strongly opposed Golden rice, a breed of rice that has been genetically engineered to biosynthesize beta-carotene, a precursor of Vitamin A. It was developed because of its potential to prevent children from becoming blind, and would assist in alleviating the vitamin A deficiency in developing countries. Shiva has claimed that the women of Bengal grow and eat 150 greens which can do the same.

Sunita Narain

Sunita Narain is an Indian environmentalist, political activist and a proponent of the Green concept of sustainable development. Narain heads the 'Centre for Science and Environment', 'Society for Environmental Communications', and is the editor of the fortnightly magazine, *Down To Earth*. She has also been in Time Magazine's list of 100 Most Influential People In 2016. Ms. Narain has been actively involved with issues related to global democracy, climate change, water, forest and resources management. In 2012, she wrote the 7th State of India's Environment Reports, Excreta Matters, an analysis of urban India's water supply and pollution. Narain remains an active participant, both nationally and internationally, in civil society. She is currently in charge of the Centre's management and plays an active role in a number of research projects and public campaigns.

Maneka Gandhi

Maneka Gandhi, the Indian Union Cabinet Minister for Women & Child Development in the Government of PM Narendra Modi. She is an animal rights activist and environmentalist and has been active in the areas of etymology, law and animal welfare.

Maneka Gandhi is a well known environmentalist and animal rights leader in India and has earned international awards and acclaim. She as the chairwoman of the Committee for the Purpose of Control and Supervision of Experiments on Animals (CPCSEA) in 1995 has carried unannounced inspections of laboratories where animals are used for scientific research was conducted. She has filed Public Interest Litigations that have achieved the replacement of the municipal killing of homeless dogs with a sterilization programme, the unregulated sale of airguns and a ban on mobile or travelling zoos. She started the organisation *People for Animals* in 1992 which is the largest organisation for animal rights/welfare in India. Maneka Gandhi is a patron of International Animal Rescue.

Medha Patkar

Medha Patkar is an Indian social activist and social reformer turned politician. She is the founder member of Narmada Bachao Andolan.

She was a representative to the World Commission on Dams, to research the environmental, social and economic impacts of the development of large dams globally. Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) carried out by Medha Patkar is a movement consisting of tribals, farmers, environmentalists and human rights activists against a number of large dams being built across the Narmada River flowing through Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra.

Discussion

The Eco feminists, environmentalists and social workers have made efforts and sacrifices for the conservation of environment. Keeping in view the inherent capabilities of women in environmental management there arises a need to develop measures for women entrepreneurship, development, educational and vocational training in various fields, communication skills, creativity and innovation. Along with it quality management and control, inventory and production management also needs to be strengthened throughout the length and breadth of the country.

By establishing domestic and international non-governmental organizations, many women have recognized themselves and acknowledged to the world that they not only have the right to participate in environmental dilemmas but also have a peculiar relationship with environment including different needs, responsibilities, and knowledge about natural resources. This is why women are affected differently than men by environmental degradation, deforestation, pollution and over population. Involving women in protecting the environment would help societies develop the sense of responsibility as the future generations observe and learn what their mothers practice.

Weaving together the many strands of the ecofeminism movement is the concept of reproduction constructed in its broadest sense to include the continued biological and social reproduction of human life and the continuance of life on earth. In this sense there is perhaps more unity than diversity in women's common goal of restoring the natural environment and quality of life for people and other living and nonliving inhabitants of the planet. Thus it is advisable that the resources and strength of women need to be channelized to develop their full potential so that they take their rightful place as equal partners in all spheres. Hence, ecofeminism can be the key to environmental harmony, sustainability, and diversity in the age of science and technology.

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