



## WOMEN AND ENVIRONMENT

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## KEYWORDS :

**Introduction:** Environment comes from the French word 'environ' which mean surroundings. The environment means our surroundings: the air, the water and the earth. Environment refers to the surrounding (both living and non-living) of the living species. The human-beings, plants, animals and other living beings operate in the environment. Environment is also sometimes referred to as habitat. Gender differences are evident in the use and management of natural resources, and unequal relationships in the family, community, etc. mediate women's access to resources; Gender differences are evident in livelihood strategies that are rooted in particular uses of the environment; Gender differences are evident in knowledge of the environment, knowledge of specific resources, and of environmental problems;

Women nowadays are participating equally with men in all fields. They are ahead of men particularly in the matter of prevention of pollution and protection, preservation, and conservation of environment. This can be proved by the participation of women in various environmental movements starting from "Chipko Movement" to the "Narmada Bachao Andolan". Amrita Bai gave a start for the Chipko Movement in a small village of Khejrili, a movement later revived by Bachni Devi and Gaura Devi of Uttar Pradesh, who snatched the axe from the wood cutters, restricted them from cutting the trees. Medha Patkar is a graduate in social sciences who moved to live among the tribal of the Narmada Valley in the mid-1980s. She played an important role in the formation of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, of which she is one of the principal spokespersons. In a great confrontation between Narmada Bachao Andolan supporters and pro-dam forces in 1991, her 21-day fast brought her close to death. These are very few examples of many, in which women have struggled for the conservation of environment. Though women are actively taking part in the protection of environment, their participation in the formulation, planning, and execution of environmental policies still remains low. No environmental program can achieve success without the involvement of women. Without their full participation, sustainable development cannot be achieved.

According to Indian mythology, the nature comprises of five basic elements, i.e., fire, air, water, earth, and sky. It is our duty to maintain ecological balance between these elements, which if disturbed would lead to the destruction of nature itself in India, womenfolk all over the country, from ancient times to the present day, worship plants, trees, rivers, mountains, and animals. It is believed that cutting a tree is a sin and planting a tree is considered sacred. A careful study of our traditional customs reveals that Indian women worship the elements of nature as part of their culture and sacrament.

#### Women, Environment and Development

Different discourses have shaped the way that sustainable development is approached, and as time goes on women have become more integrated in shaping these ideas. The definition of sustainable development is highly debated itself, but is defined by Harcourt as a way to "establish equity between generations" and to take into account "social, economic, and environmental needs to conserve non-renewable resources" and decrease the amount of waste produced by industrialization. The first discourse that emerged in relation to women was Women in Development (WID) which then transformed into Women, Environment, and Development (WED). "The women, environment and development debate (WED-debate) is anchored in a critical view of development policies where the link between modernization/industrialization and technology on the one hand and environmental deterioration on the other is focused" WED discourse is centralized around the synthesis of different ideologies, one of which

being ecofeminism.. Ecofeminism may be seen as a root ideology for WED, whereas women are viewed with a biological connection to nature that enables them to have a deeper connection and stewardship of it. This ideology was transformed into the political sphere where it took a new shape as women having a socially constructed connection to nature through our global systems.

#### Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism says that women are closer to nature than men are. This closeness, therefore, makes women more nurturing and caring towards their environment. Ecofeminism encompasses a variety of views but has a focus of patriarchal oppression and the social constructions relating to women and the environment. Some indicate the biology of women as the reason behind the closeness, while others credit culture and historical factors. An ecofeminist believes in a direct connection between oppression of nature and the subordination of women. Vandana Shiva, is credited with bringing ecofeminism into public consciousness by her reports of the chipko movement. The Chipko movement also led to the formation of anti-alcoholism

#### Women farmers and the environment

Female in the agricultural sector, whether through traditional means or industrial, for subsistence or as an agricultural laborer, represents a momentous demographic group. Agriculture is directly tied to issues such as economic independence, decision-making abilities, agency and access to education and health services and this manner has created externalities such as poverty and marginalization, and compounded issues of gender inequality. Extreme climatic changes are among the factors that have begun to jeopardize agricultural production globally. India's agricultural sector which depends greatly on the variations in climate and weather is defined mainly by the monsoon season. The appropriate levels of precipitation that last from June to September, predicate a bountiful agricultural yield later on in the year. Monsoon seasons with insufficient or excessive precipitation, hurts the agricultural sector. Increasing temperatures and erratic precipitation has begun to exhaust agricultural land and create high variations of land. In the past couple of years these trends have made a noticeable impact in India, causing droughts and unpredictable rainfall. Just one season of such weather patterns can be devastating to the livelihood of farmers, who can find no resilience in small farms. The loss of biodiversity in India and specifically food crops is a serious concern of food security and sustainability of the agricultural sector in India. The connection between women farmers and environmental health is not simply for subsistence and survival. It also stems from a long existing cultural valuation of India's agricultural fertility in ritual and practice. Women's connection to land is reflected in their almanac-like knowledge of plant varieties. Rituals and ceremonies in various parts of the country show this close relationship. There is Lohri, the harvest festival of Punjab or navadhanya puja, which translate to the worship of nine cereals, celebrations that take place in southern India. Both ceremonies celebrate the role of women in agriculture and fertility and importance of environment and biodiversity. Furthermore, traditional agricultural methods heavily utilized by women subsistence farmers boast environmentally friendly features, such as seed preservation, natural fertilizers and crop rotation techniques that do not exhaust delicate soil. In the wake of Green Revolution's reforms, it is clear that many of the high yield recommendations had severe environmental impacts. The negative environmental impacts of the Green Revolution are barely beginning to show their full affect. The widespread chemical pollution in communities that utilize pesticides and herbicides is creating a public health problem, which has disproportionately impacted women in a majority of the world, women are responsible for farm work and related domestic food production. An increasing

number of women are taking over and expanding their involvement in agricultural tasks but this has not changed the gender division of labor with regard to reproductive work.

### **CLIMATE CHANGE AND WOMEN**

Many of the environmental effects of climate change have disproportionately placed women in more vulnerable circumstances. Environmental occurrences that effect the activities women are found to be mainly responsible for in developing countries include increase in storm frequency and intensity, increase in floods, droughts, and fires. The Indian Government's National Action Plan on Climate Change said "The impacts of climate change could prove particularly severe for women. With climate change there would be increasing scarcity of water, reductions in yields of forest biomass, and increased risks to human health with children, women and the elderly in a household becoming the most vulnerable. ...special attention should be paid to the aspects of gender.

### **GENDER AND PERCEPTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

Given the environmental degradation caused while men have had dominance over women, and women's large investment in environmental sustainability, some have theorized that women would protect the Earth better than men if in power. Although there is no evidence for this hypothesis, recent movements have shown that women are more sensitive to the earth and its problems. They have created a special value system about environmental issues. People's approaches to environmental issues may depend on their relationship with nature. Both women and nature have been considered as subordinate's entities by men throughout history, which conveys a close affiliation between them.

### **ECOLOGICAL MOVEMENTS INITIATED BY WOMEN**

There have been many movements around the world over time concerned to save the environment and lives of those dependent on it, few important amongst them are like the famous chipko movement, Narmada Bacho Andolan, save the western Ghats etc. in India.

**Chipkomovement:** one of the first environmentalist movement which was inspired by women was the chipko movement (Women tree-huggers in India). "Its name comes from a Hindi word meaning "to stick" (as in glue). The movement was an act of defiance against the state government's permission given to a corporation for commercial logging. Women of the villages resisted, embracing trees to prevent their felling to safeguard their lifestyles which were dependent on the forests. Deforestation could qualitatively alter the lives of all village residents but it was the women who agitated for saving [End Page 163] the forests. Organized by a non-governmental organization that Chandi Prasad Bhatt led, the Chipko movement adopted the slogan "ecology is permanent economy". The women embracing the trees did not tag their action as feminist activism; however, as a movement that demonstrated resistance against oppression, it had all the markings of such. "It began when Maharajah of Jodhpur wanted to build a new palace in Rajasthan, which is India's Himalayan foothills. While the axe men were cutting the trees, Marty Amrita Devihugged one of the trees. This is because in Jodhpur, each child had a tree that could talk to it. The axmen ignored Devi, and after taking her off the tree, cut it down. Her daughters are environmentalists like Candi Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna **Green Belt movement:** Another movement, which is one of the biggest in women and environmental history, is the Green Belt movement. Nobel prize winner Wangari Mathai founded this movement on the world environmental day in June 1977. This movement led by Maathai focused on restoration of Kenya's rapidly diminishing forests as well as empowering the rural women through environmental preservation, with a special emphasis on planting indigenous trees.

**Narmada Bachao Andolan:** Narmada Bachao Andolan is the most powerful mass movement, started in 1985, against the construction of huge dam on the Narmada River. Narmada is the India's largest west flowing river, which supports a large variety of people with distinguished culture and tradition ranging from the indigenous (tribal) people inhabited in the jungles here to the large number of rural population. The proposed Sardar Sarovar Dam and Narmada Segar will displace more than 250,000 people. The big fight is over the resettlement or the rehabilitation of these people. The two proposals are already under construction, supported by US \$550 million loan by the World Bank (1985). There are plans to build over 3000 big and small dams along the river. It is a multi-crore project that will generate

big revenue for the government. The Narmada Valley Development plan is the most promised and most challenging plan in the history of India. The proponents are of the view that it will produce 1450 MW of electricity and pure drinking water to 40 million people covering thousands of villages and towns. Some of the dams have been already been completed such as Tawa and Bargi Dams. (Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra) But the opponents say that this hydro project will devastate human lives and bio diversity by destroying thousands of acres of forests and agricultural land. On the other hand, it will overall deprive thousands of people of their livelihood. They believe that the water and energy could be provided to the people through alternative technological means that would be ecologically beneficial. Led by one of the prominent leader Medha Patkar, it has now been turned into the International protest, gaining support from NGOs all around the globe. Protestors are agitating the issue through the mass media, hunger strikes, massive marches, rallies and the through the on screen of several documentary films. Although they have been protesting peacefully, but they are been harassed, arrested and beaten up by the police several times. The Narmada Bachao Andolan has been pressurizing the World Bank to withdraw its loan from the project through media's.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Women and the environment are suffering because people have become increasingly impatient and cruel. Ancient women were caring towards forest. They could more easily identify themselves with trees. But, sometimes modern women and men are more materialistic and detached from environment. They are attracted to just the products of the environment. Industrialists are using this situation in their favor. We need to change our consumption habits besides strengthening our conservation policies. Women have a deeper connection with nature. It is urgent that we realize this bond and act accordingly. more women should participate in environmental conservation and decision making. Only then can we do better environmental conservation. Environment and gender issues need to be taken together and the new social movements in India seem to provide the ray of hope for future change.

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