



THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CONSERVATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ASSAM

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Abstract

Environmental degradation is one of the most pressing global challenges today. This issue has garnered significant attention from academics, social scientists, environmentalists, and policymakers worldwide. In response to the growing threat to the environment, numerous environmental movements have emerged across the globe, including in India, where such movements have been prominent at various times. Women, who are often more closely connected to nature, have played a pivotal role in these environmental protection efforts. This paper seeks to explore the deep connection between women and nature, as well as the significant contributions of women to various environmental movements in India. Additionally, it highlights the efforts of female environmental activists from Assam who are actively working to protect and preserve the environment.

Keywords: Women, Environment movement, Assam, India.

1.1: INTRODUCTION

"Advancing gender equality, through reversing the various social and economic handicaps that make women voiceless and powerless, may also be one of the best ways of saving the environment." -Amartya Sen, 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economics

Two of the most pressing issues that researchers are currently exploring are environmentalism and gender. Since the mid-1990s, a growing trend in academia has emerged that links these two critical areas, focusing on women as key agents of change and protectors of the

environment. This shift is reflected in global initiatives like the Millennium Development Goals, which emphasize both gender equality and environmental sustainability.

Involving women in environmental protection efforts is crucial for fostering a sense of responsibility within societies, helping to maintain a sustainable balance between human activity and the planet's resources. Women play a pivotal role in environmental conservation and the management of natural resources, often leading efforts in environmental rehabilitation and preservation. Due to their roles as farmers and as primary collectors of water and firewood, women have a deep connection with their local environments and are often the most directly affected by environmental degradation.

Environmentalism, broadly defined as concern for the environment and actions to mitigate negative human impacts (Davies, 2020), is increasingly being linked to gender equality. But what does gender equality have to do with environmentalism? Historical evidence suggests that gender equality provides a foundation for environmental conservation. For instance, research indicates that parliaments with higher representation of women are more likely to ratify environmental treaties (Elwell & Williams, 2016). Traditionally, women have been more closely aligned with nature, and environmental degradation directly impacts their lives. Studies have shown that women are primarily responsible for tasks such as collecting potable water and other daily essentials, which depend heavily on the availability of natural resources (Elwell & Williams, 2016).

Women play a vital role in the management of natural resources, including soil, water, forests, and energy, and they often possess profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world (World Bank, 1991). Numerous studies have demonstrated that this intimate connection with nature makes women more attuned to environmental issues and skilled in managing natural resources. Environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources have severe consequences for women, affecting their time, income, health, and overall quality of life. This close relationship between women and nature has given rise to the theory of **Ecofeminism**, which posits that both nature and women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by patriarchal and capitalist systems (Shiva & Mies, 1993).

1.2: WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS

These are the reasons for which women are deeply attached to the different environmental protection movements. Globally, Rachel Carson is known as the mother of environmental movements because of the questions she raised in her book 'Silent Spring' in the year 1962 where she talked about the consequences of using chemical pesticides (Women and Environmental Movements and Policies in India).

A wide range of protests have emerged globally under the leadership of women in different parts of the globe to save the environment from destruction. For example, in 1978 Love Canal Homeowners Association Movement, protests to save the Amazon forest by the Amazonian

women, Green Belt Movement in Kenya, Anti Militarist Movement in the US and Europe, the Dhama Raksha Reforestation Program in Thailand by the rural Thai women, the protest against the Three Gorges Dam Project in China etc.

In the Indian context, women have a close connection with the very environmental movements. The origin of the environment protection movement in India dates back to Kehjali movement and gained its peak through Chipko movement, Appiko movement, Save Silent Valley movement and Narmada Bachao Andolan which succinctly show the extensive participation of women (Mago & Gunwal, 2019). During that period the eco-feminism theory developed in India which established conceptual interlinkage between sexist oppression and environmental degradation.

Harsh Sethi has divided the women's movement into five categories. 1. Forest has. 2. Land use, 3. Against big dams, 4. Against pollution created by industries, 5. Against overexploitation of marine resources (Women and Environmental Movements and Policies in India).

The environmental movements in India widely participated by women are shown below:

Table:1

Sl no	Name	Year	Women leaders	Place	Cause
1	Bishnoi’s Movement	1731	Amrit Bai	Khejarallai	To save Khejri trees
2	Chipko movement	1972	Bachni Devi & Gauri Devi	Uttarakhand	To save the forest in the Terai region of Himalayan foothills
3	Silent Valley Movement	1976	Sugatha kumari	Kerala	Against construction of dam for hydroelectric power project in Silent Valley

4	Appiko movement	1983		Karnataka	To protect Western Ghat forests
5	Navdanya Movement	1984	Vandana Shiva	Different states of India	Focused on Biodiversity and traditional seed bank
6	Narmada Bachao Andolan	1985	Medha Patekar	Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh	Against the Construction of Dams on the Narmada River funded by the World Bank
7	Nadi Bachao Abhiyan	2008	Radha Bhatt	Uttarakhand	Against the Hydroelectric power project on Ganga

Source: Compiled by the authors

Additionally, numerous organizations are dedicated to environmental protection. For instance, the Deccan Development Society in Telangana, established in 1983, focuses on promoting sustainable agriculture. Similarly, the Self Employment Women's Association (SEWA) of India, a collective of over two million women, is actively working to adopt and implement small-scale clean technologies (Mago & Gunwal, 2019).

In India, several women worked hard to save the environment from destruction.

1. Amrita Bai: She was the first woman of India who lost her life in an attempt to protect the Khejri trees from cutting in Rajasthan. She belonged to the Bishnoi community.
2. Gaura Devi and Bachni Devi: They were the leaders of the Chipko movement. They organized the women to hug the trees to save them from cutting. The Chipko movement is known as the mother of all environmental movements in India.
3. Sunita Narain: She was a frontline environmentalist of India who was the chairperson of the Tiger Task Force for conservation in 2005. She was a member of the Prime Minister Council for Climate Change and National Ganga River Basin Authority (Mago & Gunwal, 2019).

4. Medha Patekar: She was an environmental activist who mobilized the people against the dam projects on the Narmada River. She questioned the existing model of development and demanded for an alternative model which is more sustainable and environment friendly. She followed democratic and non-violent means of protest.

5. Menaka Gandhi: She was an environmentalist in India and a frontline worker of protection of animal rights. She founded People for Animals an animal welfare organization in India.

6. Vandana Shiva: Well-known for her writings about eco-feminism, Vandana Shiva is also famous for her works to protect forests and biodiversity. She was awarded many titles, and honoured as 'environmental hero' for her works towards the environment. She was the leader of Navdanya movement also.

7. Radha Bhatt: She fought against the hydroelectric power projects on Ganga in 2008. She organized a 2000 km march for the rights for water.

1.3: MAJOR POLICIES AND PROGRAMS FOR THE PROTECTION OF ENVIRONMENT AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS ON WOMEN

The Indian government has implemented various environmental policies aimed at safeguarding the environment and promoting sustainable development. These policies also recognize the crucial role women play in environmental conservation and resource management, integrating gender considerations into their frameworks.

National Environment Policy (2006):

The National Environment Policy (2006) acknowledges the complex challenges faced by a diverse, developing society like India, which include economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental issues. The policy emphasizes the importance of addressing these challenges in tandem with the overarching goal of alleviating mass poverty, ensuring livelihood security, healthcare, and education, empowering disadvantaged groups, and eliminating gender disparities. This policy highlights the interconnectedness of environmental sustainability and social equity, with a focus on improving the lives of marginalized communities, particularly women.

National Forest Policy (1988) and Joint Forest Management (JFM):

The National Forest Policy of 1988 and the Joint Forest Management (JFM) program of the 1990s introduced significant reforms, particularly in terms of gender inclusion. The policy mandated that women must constitute 33% of the membership in Vana Samarakshana Samitis (Forest Protection Committees). This inclusion has been a key factor in the success of forest management programs across various states. The rationale behind these initiatives was that deforestation issues could be more effectively addressed if state Forest Departments collaborated with local communities in managing and reforesting degraded forests. Women's involvement in

these programs has been crucial, as they are often the primary users of forest resources and possess deep knowledge of sustainable forest management practices.

Biodiversity Act (2002):

The Biodiversity Act of 2002 recognizes women as essential stakeholders and custodians of traditional knowledge, particularly in agricultural communities where women have historically been seed keepers. This act acknowledges the critical role women play in conserving biodiversity and ensuring the sustainability of farming practices. By involving women in biodiversity conservation efforts, the act aims to preserve traditional ecological knowledge while promoting gender equity in environmental governance.

Water Harvesting and Management Programs:

Water management programs across India have increasingly involved women, reflecting the gendered dimensions of water use and management. Women, who are typically responsible for water collection and management in households, have been active participants in water conservation projects. A notable example is the Sukhomajri village in the Shivalik range of the Himalayas in Haryana, where women played a pivotal role in the successful management of forests and water resources, earning nationwide recognition. The Gujarat Water Policy (2002) also emphasizes the critical role of women in rural water supply, domestic urban water consumption, health and sanitation, and agricultural production. It advocates for the involvement of grassroots women in local water management decisions, recognizing that their participation leads to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

Renewable Energy Policies:

Renewable energy policies in rural areas have targeted women as key beneficiaries, particularly through initiatives involving biogas plants, solar cookers, and solar panels. These clean energy solutions are designed to alleviate the burden on women, who are often responsible for cooking and managing household energy needs. Policymakers are increasingly recognizing the importance of engaging women in the energy sector, both in policy formulation and project design. By acknowledging women's roles in energy consumption and management, these policies aim to promote access to sustainable energy solutions that improve the quality of life for women and their communities.

Implications for Women:

These policies and programs have significant implications for women, both in terms of empowering them and improving their quality of life. By involving women in environmental decision-making and resource management, these initiatives not only enhance environmental outcomes but also promote gender equality. Women's participation in these programs has led to

more sustainable and equitable management of natural resources, while also providing them with opportunities for economic empowerment and leadership in their communities.

The Indian government's environmental policies and programs have increasingly recognized the vital role of women in achieving sustainable development. By integrating gender considerations into these initiatives, the policies aim to create more inclusive and effective approaches to environmental conservation, benefiting both women and the broader community.

1.4: ROLE OF WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENT MOVEMENTS IN ASSAM

Assam is a land of culture and history. biodiversity, natural resources etc. It is an area full of different tribes residing here from a very long period of time. The forest area of Assam is decreasing day by day due to human encroachment. History shows that the tribal people are more inclined towards the environment as their livelihood depends upon nature. Especially, the women play an important role in the conservation of biodiversity and the environment from destruction.

In Assam, most of the tribal people are dependent on nature. The traditions, festivals, and cultures of the various tribes have a close connection with nature. For example: the Bihu festival of Assam. Bathou Puja of Bodos, Ali Aai Lrigang of Mising. Baitho of Kacharis etc. The tribal women of Assam have tremendous knowledge about nature and natural medicine. Tanushree Sarkar, in her study, showed that in Assam, Bodo women conserve about 48 different plants to use for socio-cultural and religious purposes in the BTC (Bodoland Territorial Council) area (Goswami,2020).

The natural environment conservation success rate in Assam is increasing. A lot of women from Assam are trying to protect the environment in different ways. Rupjyoti Gogoi, a resident of Bocha Gaon, near Kaziranga National Park, started an enterprise named 'Village Weaves' that gathers the waste- plastic bottles, packets of snacks, and water bottles to create handloom products from it. Since 2004 this enterprise has empowered more than 2300 women from different villages of Assam contributing towards the conservation of nature (Lal, 2021).

Dr. Purnima Devi Barman known as 'Hargila Baido" (Miss Hargila) is a well-known environmental activist in Assam. She is a member of the NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) Aranyak". She is continuously giving her efforts to save the 'Greater Adjutant Stork (Hargila in Assamese) from extinction. The New Zealand High Commission is also extended its helping hand for the 'Hargila Army consists of the rural women of Assam (WINN News, 2019). Barman also achieved the prestigious Green Oscars Award 2017 for her relentless works to save Hargila in Dadara, Pachariya and Hingimari villages of Kamrup (United News of India, 2022).

Recently, Nizara Phukan, a PhD student of Jawaharlal Nehru University completed a 2000 km march from her home district Charaideo to New Delhi 'to save Mother Earth'. She wanted to create awareness among the people for planting trees. She, with her friends, started an organization

named 'Brikhyabandhu which works to save the environment and tackle climate change (The Telegraph, 22 Dec, 2019).

1.5: CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is clear that Women plays a very vital role in protecting environment and contributing towards the better ways of preserving the same. Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation is, therefore, is essential to achieving sustainable development. Women, particularly those living in rural areas or mountain areas have a special relationship with the environment. 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.

In recent times one of the most prominent issues in the international sphere is the degradation of the environment. There are lots of examples of environmental hazards in recent times Recently in Assam nearly 100 endangered vultures were found dead near the Chhaygaon area in Assam's Kamrup district. Vultures are often overlooked and perceived as lowly scavengers, but they play a crucial role in the environments in which they live. A vulture is a bird of prey that scavenges for its food, meaning that it searches the ground for animal carcasses to eat. Typically, these carcasses are what is left uneaten by other predators. The decline in vulture populations in some parts of the world, including India, may have serious consequences for ecosystems and humans alike, according to a new study that suggests poisoning is the greatest extinction risk facing the scavengers.

Not only the role woman is underrated but there is also the lack of adequate government role in protecting the environment. Recently amidst the Covid 19, there was a huge ongoing protest against the protection of Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve all over India. The protestors are urging the Prime Minister of India, the Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change of India, the Chief Minister of Assam and the NBWL to stop any current and future coal mining project in Saleki and the whole of Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve, stating that legal and illegal coal extraction is having and will have catastrophic consequences for the whole ecosystem of the region.

The environment is now not only a national but also an international concern and there are lots of ongoing movements for the protection and maintenance of the eco-friendly environment, lot of activists are engaged in protecting the environment. In Assam activist like Dr Purnima Devi Barman Rupjyoti Gogoi and Nizara Phukan etc are strongly working for the protection of the environment. There is an improvement on the part of people for the protection of the environment and it the high time we realize our responsibility towards the protection of our environment.

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