

ROLE OF WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

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ABSTRACT

Various studies on women and environment have shown that women play significant role in natural resource management and they contribute majorly to environmental rehabilitation and conservation. While addressing some key environmental problems, women play a dominant role. Women, through their roles as farmers and as collectors of water and firewood, are closely connected with their local environment and often suffer the most directly from environmental problems. Women's direct contact with environment has produced them deep- knowledge about the environment. Thus, they have served as agriculturalists, water resource manager, and traditional scientists, among others. Women are not only knowledgeable about the environment, but they are also protective and caring..They being primarily responsible for domestic and household management, interact more intensively with the natural environment and build the environment more than men. Consequently, they are more likely to suffer from a degraded home, neighborhood, and city environment and to shoulder more of the burden that goes with living in poor housing and communities with inadequate residential and health infrastructure, since they spend more time at home. But throughout the 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. The deep connection women have with the environment makes them more responsible and initiator in coming forefront when it comes to the movements to protect the environment. .Over the years we had seen many environmental issues being addressed by the society initiated by the women folk.

Keywords: Women, Environmental Conservation, Movements

INTRODUCTION

Women Symbolize 'Prakriti' means 'Nature' in Indian Philosophy. She creates and nurtures the creation to bloom. She signifies 'shakti' - the power that drives the system. True, that the status of Indian women has eroded significantly since the Vedic times .Nevertheless, with the spread of

education and social reforms 20th century experienced reawakening and a gradual uprise. The objective of the present paper is to focus on facts and figures of modern day women's contribution in the process of environmentally sound development. Both women and nature have been considered as subordinates entities by men throughout history, which conveys a close relationship between them. Some scholars are of the opinion that men had degraded the physical environment abruptly while they had dominance over women and women's great investment in sustainability of environment. Whereas some other 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. Women in India are playing a crucial role in protection and conservation of environment. They have brought a different perspective to the environment debate, because of their different experience base. Poor women's lives are not compartmentalized and they see the issues in a broad and holistic perspective. They understand clearly that economics and environment are compatible. Their experience reveals to them that soil, water and vegetation, necessary for their day-to-day living, requires care and good management. Environmental degradation is related not only to the biosphere alone, but to the social sphere as well. Traditionally, women have been responsible for subsistence and survival for water, food, fuel, fodder and habitat, though they rarely get the credit for nurturing these life support systems. In addition, this environmental destruction worsens women's problem in a way very difficult from that of man. Women have always been the major conservers of bio-diversity. Even today they perform duties such as seed selection, multiplication and conservation. The on-farm conservation traditions of rural and tribal women, with reference to agro-biodiversity are well known. Unfortunately, current food security systems depend on too few crops. It is important to expand the basis of food security by including large numbers of spices and varieties of food plants still maintained by tribal and rural families. For this purpose, women can be trained in the revitalization of the on-farm conservation traditions of the older generation through bio-technological process. The training should also include equipping them for compiling bio-diversity inventories and for taking decision on issues like giving consent to using their genetic material by breeding companies / institutions. Traditionally, women are responsible for resource mobilization and management. Fuel, fodder and water collections are the accepted responsibilities of women. As the environment degrades, these basic necessities become difficult to collect. The time a woman spends on gathering fuel, fodder and water, as well as attending to household work, agricultural work and animal care, reduces her competence. Dr. M. S. Swaminathan, former member of the planning Commission stated, "If men had to fetch drinking water the 230,000 villages would not have remained without provision of drinking water after several years of planned development". Traditionally, women have dealt with non-monetized

biomass based subsistence economy of the household i.e. firewood, cow dung, crop wastes, organic manure, etc. In comparison men tend to destroy nature to earn cash even if it means creating hardship in their own families for their womenfolk to collect fuel and fodder e.g. sale of herbs and wood. The upshot is that women work as unpaid laborers on family farms with a greater role than men in operational decision making. The population pressure has increased male migration, which in turn adds to the load of work on women. Thus women's responsibilities extend from the household duties to working in the fields as well. A destructive chain reaction emerges. As the time required for fuel and fodder collection grows and firewood becomes scarce, cow-dung previously spread on the fields, is used in the kitchen, thereby depleting soil resources and causing a negative effect on the livelihood of local people and environment. Throughout history men have looked at natural resources as commercial entities or income generating tools, while women have tended to see the environment as a resource supporting their basic needs. As an example, rural Indian women collect the dead branches which are cut by storm for fuel wood to use rather than cutting the live trees Since African, Asian, and Latin American women use the land to produce food for their family, they acquire the knowledge of the land/soil conditions, water, and other environmental features. Any changes in the environment on these areas, like deforestation, have the most effect on women of that area, and cause them to suffer until they can cope with these changes . Women play a key role in the protection of biological diversity through their varied responsibilities. They have identified the need not only to protect the bio-diversity, but also to recreate it .The Indian women were always ahead in the matter of prevention of pollution and protection, preservation, conservation, promotion and enhancement of the environment They have made greater sacrifices, have exhibited greater love than man in the area of environment protection The strong desire, devotion and dedication towards better environment made Indian women a crusader against environment pollution.

ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS INITIATED BY WOMEN

People in Western countries think they originated the environmental movements without knowing that the villagers in mostly poor and developing countries initiated these movements. The direct concern of Indian women with environment protection can be traced long back to 1731 A D , when Amrita Bai of Khejaralli village of Jodhpur District of Rajasthan sacrificed her life for saving the trees of her village. She is the founder of the modern “**Chipko Movement**”. In order to save the trees, she embraced the trees and was cut as per the orders of the then Maharaja. Her three daughters and later her husband came forward and one by one 363 people were killed and the trees remained untouched because of villagers strong resistance. This movement started by Amrita Bai in 1731 A D was revived by Bachni Devi and Gaura Devi of Uttar Pradesh in 1972. They snatched the axe from the wood cutters and warned contractors not to cut the trees.

They gave a slogan which means forests bear soil, water and air and the three substances are basic requirements of our life. An example of female prominence in the defense of natural forests comes from India in 1906. As forest clearing was expanding conflict between loggers and government and peasant communities increased to thwart resistance to the forest clearing, the men were diverted from their villages to a fictional payment compensation site and loggers were sent to the forests. The women left in the villages, however, protested by physically hugging themselves to the trees to prevent their being cut down, giving rise to what is now called the Chipko movement, an environmentalist movement initiated by these Indian women (which also is where the term tree-huggers originated). This conflict started because men wanted to cut the trees to use them for industrial purposes while women wanted to keep them since it was their food resource and deforestation was a survival matter for local people. 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 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 foot hills. While the axe men were cutting the trees, martyr Amrita Devi hugged 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 environmentalists like Chandi Prasad Bhatt and Sunderlal Bahuguna. The threat of deforestation was enough to rally the local women to civil disobedience to protect the eco-system. They knew very well that their well being, their prosperity, their life, all was associated with the forest. Some commentators have described chipko movement as Women's movement (Bahuguna 1975; Bhatt and Kumar 1982, Jain 1983, Mishra & Tripathi 1978). It is important to recall the names of Indian women who have fought legal battles in the court of law for environment protection, as Mrs. Sarla Tripathi of Indore, Kinkari Devi of Sirmour District, Krishna Devi of Rajasthan etc. Today the torchbearers are Maneka Gandhi, an environmentalist & politician, Medha Patkar, a social worker & environmentalist who are carrying on the crusade of environment protection. But the problem of present day environment protection cannot be solved with the involvement of a few selected groups of women. It requires a global involvement of the entire community of womenfolk. Today, there is need of participation of every woman of every class / every locality, and any woman should not underestimate her role.

Green Belt movement

Another movement, which is one of the biggest in women and environment history, is the Green Belt movement. Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai founded this movement on the World Environment Day in June 1977. The starting ceremony was very simple few women planted seven trees in Maathai's backyard. By 2005 30 million trees had been planted by participants in the Green Belt movement on public and private lands. The Green Belt movement aims to bring environmental restoration along with society's economic growth. This movement led by Maathai focused on restoration of Kenya's rapidly diminishing forests as well as empowering the rural women through environmental preservation. This conflict started because men wanted to cut the trees to use them for industrial purposes while women wanted to keep them since it was their food resource and deforestation was a survival matter for local people.

Rachel Carson

One of the outstanding women environmentalists is Rachel Carson. Rachel Carson (1907-1964) was a scientist, writer, and ecologist. Rachel Carson went to the Pennsylvania College for Women, majoring in English, but she was inspired by her biology teacher so she switched her major to biology. She became more interested and focused on the sea while she was working at the Marine Biological Laboratories in Massachusetts. Her eloquent prose led to the publication of her first book, *Under the Sea-Wind: a Naturalists' Picture of Ocean Life*, in 1941. In 1949 she became chief editor of the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Her second book, *The Sea Around us*, won the National Book Award and sold more than 200,000 copies. After that she retired from FWS and became a full time writer. After her third book about the sea 'The Edge of the Sea' Carson focused on effects of chemicals and pesticides on the environment. That is when she wrote her book about environment, *Silent Spring*. The book was about what man has done to the nature and eventually to him and started a modern environmental movement. Carson believed that human and nature are mutually dependent on each other. She argued that industrial activities such as pesticides use can damage the earth ecosystem and will have far-reaching ecological consequences such as future human health problems. Today, scientific studies have demonstrated these consequences.

Maria Cherkasova

Maria Cherkasova (1938) is a journalist, ecologist, and director of Centre for Independent Ecological Programs (CIEP). She is famous because of coordinating a 4-year campaign to stop construction of hydro-electric dam on the Katun River. After Cherkasova involvement in the student movement on environmental protection in 1960's, she began to work for the Red Data Book for the Department of Environmental Protection in 1960's. She began to work for the Red Data Book for the Department of Environmental Protection Institute. She researched and

preserved rare species until she became the editor of USSR Red Data Book. Sheco- founded the Socio-Ecological Union which has become the largest ecological NGO in the former Soviet Union. In 1990, she became director of CIEP which arrange and drives activities in an extensive range of ecologically related areas on both domestic and international fronts. It is common knowledge throughout the world that the growth of technology and the processes of commercialization, industrialization, and globalization affect men and women differently. The world realizes, clearly today that real development cannot take roots if it by-passes women. Therefore, India embarks on bold and sweeping economic reforms, concern for women and efforts to bring them in main stream occupying the Centre stage. India has been a relentless champion of the success of women at all spheres in international and national forums. The women's movement in India continuously interacts with and informs public opinion. The Indian Parliament has been a front- runner in progressive legislation upholding the status of women. India has the distinction of running one of the world's largest primary health care systems and the largest child development program. India has set up a National Commission for Women through an Act of Parliament to serve as a kind of ombudsman for women's issues in the country and the day is not far off when the Parliament opens its doors for one third of its strength to women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance women's participation in environmental management for sustainable development the following recommendations are proffered: Women should be encouraged to participate in committees on environmental protection projects, programs, and policies to address gender imbalances in decision making. Women's access to land and other resources should be ensured and not undermined. The government will have to come in, in this respect, to ensure gender equity regarding access to and control of resources. Environmental education is required for the every citizen for sustainable development Environmental education will produce change in attitude of the people, as well as impact specific knowledge on the every citizen. Separation of plastic from municipal solid wastes and recycling of plastic will help to reduce the contribution of plastic to the solid waste problem, as well as eliminate the unsightly littering. "Biodegradable plastic" could also be used (Pryde1973). These will eventually decompose. Women education and access to education for girls should be seen as a policy priority. Educated women will contribute more significantly to bridging the gap between environment and development. Empowerment of women in sustainable human development and in relation to the protection of the environment must be recognized and sustained.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the various ways women have participated actively in environmental

protection and natural resource management in order to ensure sustainable use of environmental resources. Recommendations are proffered, especially those that can help the goal of women empowerment. The critical role of women, as resource managers, as community activists, as environmental advocates, must be recognized when strategies for the protection of the environment are being developed. Women should be allowed to participate at the local, regional, national, and international levels on environmental issues. In the words of Maye (1994), this participation, to be meaningful, should go beyond tokenism. To make a significant impact on decision making, women should be present in equal numbers to men (or at least on a 40:60 proportional split of genders). As resource managers, women should be consulted and supported in what they are already doing to protect the environment. Specifically, more women should be involved in decision making with regard to policies programs, or funding of environment.

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