
Women and Environment

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Environment emerged as an international issue at the 1972 Stockholm Conference. This paved the way for concrete policy decisions on environmental management in the World Commission on Environment and Development, which produced the Brundtland Report in 1987. This was followed by Earth Summit at Rio in 1992, commonly known as the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development. As a result of these international conferences, national Governments have been under compulsion to adopt positive policy measures intended to protect, promote and conserve the environment.

Sustainable Development

The concept of sustainable development advanced by the Brundtland Report was defined as: development that fulfils the needs of the present without compromising on the ability of the future generations to meet their needs. Sustainability in this sense depends greatly on indigenous knowledge of local population born out of natural life experiences. The conservation of natural resources and preservation of biodiversity have been almost invariably enacted by folk societies. The primary reason for this is the realisation by the governments and the civil society that current patterns of Development have led to displacement and loss of livelihood of local communities. The two major causes of destruction are: (a) Elite-led modernisation with its emphasis on indiscriminate overconsumption by the elite which has been responsible for steady resource depletion, eco-destruction and planetary disequilibrium. (b) Development from above has actually meant deprivation from below. Building of dams, defence installations, flyovers, expressway, metro-lines have been responsible for pushing the marginalised virtually on the brink of starvation.

The devastation becomes more complex in case of women in the marginalised communities who tend to be the worst sufferers. Therefore, this realisation among the policy makers that the consumerist model or top – down development model needs to moderate and also that

there is a lot that one can learn from the traditional folk societies in respect of wise and balanced resource use. Moreover, women have been found to be the torch-bearers in maintaining balance between using resources but at the same time not to over utilise them keeping in mind the interests of posterity. Conservation of basic life support systems of land, water, flora, fauna, and forest is in the nature of women folk.

Role of women in conserving nature

The destruction of biomass resources has impacted women from all cultures particularly rural. Maximum affect has been felt by women from landless and marginal families. (Aggarwal and Narain 1985:342). Women continue to deal with the non-monetised, biomass-based substance economy of the household, whereas men are more involved with cash economy. Within the same household, women face great hardships in collecting daily fuel and fodder. Within the same household, women face great hardships in collecting daily fuel and fodder, men are inspired to destroy nature to earn cash.

The responsibility of collection of household needs like fuel, fodder and water lies with women due to the culturally accepted norms of division of labour in the family. Environmental degradation makes the collection work more difficult for women who have to put in extra time and efforts for collection of fuel and fodder in addition to household and agricultural works.

The relationships between men and women have been affected in a peculiar way by the penetration of cash economy which has led to further enhancement of exploitation of forests. This is a matter of great botheration for women where forests are destroyed by their own men or by outsiders.

Of the two paradigms of forestry in India, the life-enhancing paradigm emanates from the feminine principles. Its emphasis is on sustainable renewable forest system, supporting recycling sources of food and water. Its primary goal is maintenance of conditions of renewability.

The other paradigm is life-destroying which emerges or is grounded in the factory and the market. Its primary management objective is maximizing of profits through commercial extraction. (Shiva, 1988).

Afforestation with Eucalyptus is considered to be in total disregard of nature its cycles, a symbol of anti-life afforestation. Greening with eucalyptus is violence against ecological appropriateness. The eucalyptus certainly increased cash and commodity flows but absorbed the moisture of the soil leaving it dry and infertile. It resulted in disastrous interruption of organic matter and water flows within the local ecosystem. The crux of the matter is, in the reductionist paradigm, fruit production was never the concern of the forestry; rather it focused on wood and wood for the market alone.

Plantation drive of Eucalyptus on mass basis was resisted by women throughout India because of its destruction of water, social and food systems. The women and small peasants of *Barha* and *Holahalli* villages in Tumkur, district (Karnataka) marched to a forest nursery in August, 1983 and destroyed eucalyptus plantations. They pulled out eucalyptus seedlings, planting herbal and fruit trees like tamarind and mango seeds in their place.

The work burden on women has increased manifold due to male migration, another major phenomenon in modern society. They devote more efforts and time in the family's agricultural fields by working harder on the family farm as a farm labourer. They have to take care of ageing parents, children and other household needs. While the husband is away in town to earn a living, the wife runs the household in the village by collecting free goods from nature (Aggarwal and Narain 1985: 374).

In recent years, there has been considerable emphasis on integrated watershed management in the Himalayas and the Western and Eastern Ghats due to recurrence of floods. These regions have the highest rates of female work participation in the country. Therefore involvement of women in all programmes of ecological rehabilitation in these areas becomes imperative. An interesting fact is that while men spend the cash earned by them on luxuries like radios /transistors instead of basic household needs, women work with great sincerity in activities like tree planting. Thus it will not be an exaggeration to say that in demanding an ecologically and socially sound nature, the biggest support is womankind.

Women in Action: *Chipko* Movement

The history of environmental movements in India can be traced to the *Chipko* movement in the central Himalayan region in the early 1970's. The felling of trees in the area due to development projects like the construction of roads, river, and dam projects and so on led to frequent floods in the *Alaknanda* river catchment area.

In 1973, the forest department in Uttar Pradesh, present Uttarakhand refused to allot ash trees to a local co-operative organization, *Dashauli Gram Swarajya Sangha* (DGSS) based in *Chamoli* district for making agricultural implements. Instead, the ash trees were allotted to a private company by the forest department. The DGSS fought against this injustice by lying down in front of timber trucks burning resin and timber depots; methods which were in line with the strategies of Quit India Movement. These means were of no avail; rather failed miserably. Therefore, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, a local leader from the region, suggested embracing the trees giving rise to the *Chipko* movement. The women were at the forefront of the movement who fought for their basic survival denied to them by the state.

The origin of *Chipko* (to hug) took place in the early 1973 when the forest department refused to allot ash trees to the *Dashauli Gram Swarajya Sangha* (DGSS), a local co-operative organisation based in *Chamoli* district for making agricultural implements. Meanwhile, the forest department allotted ash trees to a private company: Symonds Co. Following the strategies of Quit India Movement, DGSS fought against this injustice through lying down in front of timber trucks and burning resin and timber depots. Due to failure of these methods, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, one of the leaders, suggested embracing the trees and thus *Chipko* was formed. This form of protest was instrumental in driving away the private company felling the ash trees. The *Chipko* movement was an attempt of the local population particularly women to fight for the basic sustenance denied to them by state.

The local population, particularly the women embraced the trees, conveyed the message to chop them instead of trees, when the contractors came with armed police and axe to cut the trees. Due to the persistence of the movement against tree-felling for eight years, the UP Government was compelled to put a moratorium on felling of trees for commercial purposes. The message conveyed by the *Chipko* movement was loud and clear: trees are source of

oxygen, clean air to breathe, provides water to drink and soil to produce food and other necessities of life. They should not be treated merely as timber mines which exist to bear timber and raw materials for the industries alone. (Bahuguna, 1989).

The message of the famous *Chipko*(hug the trees) movement was simple. Trees do not bear timber and raw materials to the industries alone and are not mere timber mines, but the living products of the trees are oxygen: air to breathe; water to drink; and soil to produce food and other necessities of life (Bahuguna, 1989). When the contractors' axe came to chop the trees with armed police to help them, the women hugged the trees saying chop us, not the trees. The *Chipko* movement continued their struggle against tree-felling for 8 years till the UP Government put a moratorium on felling of the green trees for commercial purposes in this area. The women were always the backbone of the *Chipko* movement. The women continued to struggle against the agents of environmental destruction.

Chipko movement will always be remembered for its contribution in the field of afforestation. All levels of government have taken serious note of their contributions to the movement. The role of women is significant in *Chipko* movement, not only this movement but the women have significantly contributed in responding to problems related to environment, faced by local populations. The movement is also symbolic of Gandhian strategy of non-violent, democratic methods of protest where the role of local leaders for solving local problems assumes importance.

The movement flew from north to far south as *Appiko* movement. Started in 1983 in one of the districts of Karnataka state, the people of this village protested the cutting of teak trees by the *Chipko* way through embracing the trees. The activists generated awareness and spread the movement throughout the region by *padayatras*, folk dances and so on. The movement has played the most crucial role in preserving the environment and eco-system of Western Ghats.

A major weakness of the present policies for environmental protection is its lack of recognition of the crucial role that women can play in complimenting the Government's efforts, despite the valuable contribution of women in conserving environment, . The ordinary citizens, particularly women from folk societies, are not represented in decision-

making as far as the various acts of water, air and noise pollution are concerned. Lacks of sustained and strong political will to enforce the laws have aggravated the problem further without which no amount of legislation can improve the situation.

India has not been able to reap the benefits of development programmes in the post-independence era largely due to population explosion which is also responsible for environmental degradation. The duty of population control depends largely on the women-folk. Literacy among females is an important factor to control population. In India the difference between Punjab and Kerala regarding GNP is noteworthy. While Kerala's GNP has grown much more slowly and steadily as compared to Punjab, a large share of the increase has benefitted women in Kerala than in Punjab. From the Kerala example, it is clear that there is greater likelihood of greater social and demographic development if women get a fair share of the wealth and services created in society.

The time has come to acknowledge that family planning is a human right especially a woman's right and should not be imposed by the state. The path to be taken to achieve this goal should be through a healthy process of social development by focusing on women's needs and problems.

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