

PAPER—9 Module -14

Women and Environmental Movements and Policies in India

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| DESCRIPTION OF MODULE | |
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| Subject Name | <i>Women's Studies</i> |
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| Pre-requisites | <i>Basic understanding of human-nature relationship and some exposure to feminist perspectives therein.</i> |
| Objectives | <i>This module presents an overview of the role of women in environmental movements globally, and more specifically in India. It looks at some major environmental movements in India that were spearheaded by women. The module will emphasise the important contribution of women in the environmental movement across the world. The module also critically reviews policies on environment and emphasises need for policies to</i> |

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| | <i>have a gender perspective.</i> |
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Women and Environmental Movements and Policies in India

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

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. The Millennium Development Goals include both, gender equality and environmental sustainability. Involving women in protecting the environment would help societies develop the sense of responsibility needed to maintain a good balance between humans and the earth’s resources.

Social movements across the world have drawn attention to a wide range of issues facing society. The women’s movement and the environmental movement share a close association as discussed earlier, in the concept of Ecofeminism. With growing evidence of the environmental crisis, the focus on women as agents of change has intensified. Global environmental agencies and institutions now increasingly admit to the key role women play in conservation and protection of environment.

Women and Global Environmental Movements

Women’s role in environmental movements differs from the developed to the developing world. In the developed countries the issues that women are raising are largely related to pollution and the urban context, while in the developing countries the issues are linked to livelihood concerns in rural areas.

Globally, there are many examples of women writing/ fighting to save the environment. One of the first well known environmentalists was Rachel Carson, whose concern for the environment was voiced in her seminal book, ‘Silent Spring’ in 1962. Carson warned about the dangers of using chemical pesticides, particularly DDT, as it has serious effects on human health. Many see Carson as the mother of the environmental movement through the questions she raised in her book. Carson paved the way for women to come together to protect the environment. Another strong voice was that of Elinor Ostrom who pointed out that depriving communities of the access to natural resources is not the most efficient way of managing our

global inheritance. In her book '[Governing the Commons](#)' (1990) she gave the world a map to a more just and sustainable way of managing resources through collective action.

Attempts to save the environment have been made by a wide range of women, from 'housewives' to 'scientists'. In 1978, a 27 year old housewife Lois Gibbs discovered that her child was attending an elementary school built next to a 20,000 ton, toxic-chemical dump in Niagara Falls, New York. Desperate to do something about it, she organized her neighbours into the Love Canal Homeowners Association and a movement was born (see box below). In December 1997, a 23-year-old woman named Julia "Butterfly" Hill climbed a 55-meter (180 foot) tall California Coast Redwood tree. Her aim was to prevent the destruction of the tree and of the forest where it had grown. She stayed on the tree for two years and came down in December 1999. This two year long protest action by one woman saved the tall Redwoods in the California forest.

Brazil is a country rich in biological diversity, but also high in habitat destruction. One-third of the world's forests lie in Brazil. More than a fifth of the world's freshwater supply is in Brazil's rivers. Brazil boasts the world's largest river, the Amazon, and the world's largest tropical forest, the Amazon forest. The destruction of forests in Brazil has seen a rise in environmental movements. Between 1990 and 2009, Brazil's Federal government created 89 extractive and sustainable development reserves in Amazonia, encompassing 24 million hectares. The conceptual underpinning of these reserves – sustainable and multiple-use forest management – are daily put into practice by thousands of rural Amazonian women. The Secretariat of Women Extractivists of CNS helped to transform women's roles in resource management. They helped women work across sectors, in cultivation of ties with the State, capacity building, thus providing a strong foundation for an increasing role of Amazonian women to promote sustainable forest management and conservation. Another example of a women environmentalist in Brazil is of Marina Silva, a colleague of [Chico Mendes](#), who was assassinated for defending the Amazon environment. Marina Silva continues the fight to save the Amazon forests.

In Asia, women are active in environmental movements related to a range of issues. Rural peasant women in Thailand as well as in other countries, have contributed in big ways to movements to defend the environment and natural resources. Forests in Thailand declined from 53% in 1961 to 29% in 1985. A large part in restoring forests through afforestation, was played by peasant Thai women. Dhamma Rakhsa Reforestation Program in Thailand, saw women restoring forests and developing new sources of income linked to reforestation and sustainable agriculture. Thai women are also coming together to protest against eucalyptus plantations and shrimp cultivation.

In China, Dai Qing a journalist, has been part of a movement protesting the Three Gorges Dam Project on the Yangtze river, one of the largest dam projects in the world. She has been imprisoned for her writings against the dam. Japanese women have been part of local

movements against pollution because of their concern for the health of their families, especially for their children. Japanese women also played a key role in the campaign against mercury poisoning by the Chisso Corporation (a fertilizer company) in Minamata (Kyushu) because most men in that region were on the Chisso payroll and therefore could not challenge the company without endangering their livelihood. The Minamata campaign in the 60s exposed the dangers of mercury poisoning and forced industries to treat effluents before releasing them into seas, rivers and lakes.

One of the most well known environmental movements globally and in Africa is the Green Belt movement. This is an indigenous grassroots non-governmental organization based in Nairobi, Kenya that takes a holistic approach to development by focusing on environmental conservation, community development and capacity building. The Green Belt Movement was founded by Wangari Maathai in 1977 to respond to the needs of rural Kenyan women who reported that their streams were drying up, their food supply was less secure, and they had to walk further and further to get firewood for fuel and fencing. The movement encouraged the women to work together to grow seedlings and plant trees to bind the soil, store rainwater, provide food and firewood, and receive a small monetary token for their work. The Green Belt Movement drew some of its inspiration from the Chipko movement of India. Wangari Maathai its founder was awarded in 1986 the Right Livelihood Award, and in 2004 she became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Women's Movements in India

Environmental movements in India though of recent origin, have intensified in the last few decades and are raising a wide range of questions. Harsh Sethi (a leading scholar on environmental issues) divides the environmental struggles in India, into five categories: (1) forest based—forest policy, use of forest resources, etc.; (2) land use— industrialisation and loss of agriculture and, indiscriminate popularisation of chemical inputs resulting in degradation of land and waterlogging, exploitation of mineral resources; (3) against big dams involving the problem of involuntary displacement of tribals and non-tribals residing in the upstream of the river, environmental degradation including destruction of forests; (4) against pollution created by industries; and (5) against overexploitation of marine resources.

Movements in India are struggles of the poor – of the dispossessed, the marginalized, the victims of discrimination, Dalits, women, tribals and the small and landless farmers. Most movements are concerned with conserving natural resources to sustain livelihoods. One of the first such ecological movements was that from Champaran district of Bihar in 1917 where people protested against the indigo plantations that were encouraged by the British. Mahatma Gandhi took up the protests and finally the plantations were abolished. Another well-known Gandhian and political movement in the colonial period, was the Salt Satyagraha which fought for people's access to the common resources of salt pans that were being denied to them. Women began manufacturing and selling salt throughout India. [Usha Mehta](#), an early Gandhian activist, remarked that "Even our old aunts and great-aunts and grandmothers used to bring pitchers of salt water to their houses and manufacture illegal salt. And then they would shout at the top of their voices: 'We have broken the salt law!'" (Wikipedia). In both these movements women played a participative and supportive role.



Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu in the Salt Satyagraha

These initial movements saw a large number of women participating, but they were largely urban women. It was only from the 1970s that rural women spearheaded the environmental movements. In rural India, traditionally, women have been responsible for subsistence and survival for water, food, fuel, fodder and habitat. Women's position in the society is governed by the norms of a patriarchal system of social organization. Typically, men must prepare the land for cultivation because there are taboos associated with women operating the plough. Thus, women are never themselves able to initiate the process of cultivating; they must depend on men. Men also own the land, as property among is generally transmitted patrilineally. The labour required to raise crops is, however, almost entirely supplied by women. Women do the planting, weeding and harvesting and are the keepers of biodiversity. Women are more concerned with the immediate, local micro levels of everyday life and hence feel the impact of a degraded environment more.

Women in India are largely visible in the movements against deforestation and in conserving water. One of the earliest recorded encounters of women protecting their environment can be traced back to 1731 among the Bishnois, who lived in the scrub forests of Rajasthan, near Jodhpur. Amrita Bai of Khejaralli village sacrificed her life for saving the Khejri trees of her village that the Bishnois hold as sacred. In order to save the trees, she embraced the trees, and lost her life as did 363 others from among the Bishnois. As a result the forest was spared due to the strong resistance of the villagers. Amrita Bai and her band of women Bishnois can be considered the first women environmentalists of the world. This movement started by Amrita Bai in 1731 provided the inspiration for Bachni Devi and Gauri Devi of Uttar Pradesh in the Chipko movement of the 1972.

Chipko movement

The emergence of the modern Indian environmental movement can perhaps be dated to 1972, the year the Chipko movement began. The Terai region of Uttarakhand in the Himalayan foothills was a dense forest area that caught the eyes of the timber merchants. Large scale deforestation followed commercial forestry, that saw the hills denuded resulting in loss of top soil and occurrence of landslides and floods. Peasant women living in these areas saw their lives getting harder as it took them much longer to collect the daily needs of fuelwood, fodder and water. Over a period of time these women were able to connect the loss of the forests with the changes in their lives. Thus was Chipko born with Bachni Devi and Gauri Devi leading the protests.

The movement began in [Chamoli](#) district and spread throughout the Uttarakhand Himalayas by the end of the decade. Rural women came together to save their forests by hugging the trees when the contractors came to fell them. One of Chipko's most salient features was the voluntary mass participation of female villagers. As the backbone of Uttarakhand's Agrarian economy, women were most directly affected by environmental degradation and [deforestation](#), and thus related to the issues of conservation most easily. Women are seen as more sensitive to forests because they have a more direct relationship with them in these hill areas. The Chipko women were joined by Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhat who gave the movement a direction and publicity at the national level.

The Chipko Movement was not a movement just to save forests, rather, it was a movement, concerned with also the maintenance of the traditional ecological balance in the fragile Terai region, where hill people have traditionally enjoyed a positive relationship with their environment. The collective mobilization of women for the cause of preserving forests has raised issues about the present model of development that encouraged commercial forestry in the hill regions. The impact of Chipko movement did not remain confined within the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand. The movement impacted other movements across the country to save forests. The Appiko movement of the 1980s, to save forests in the Uttara Kannada region of Karnataka was inspired by the Chipko movement. The Appiko Andolan brought out a new awareness of environmental conservation in southern India and saw a large number of rural women participating. In 1950, Uttara Kannada district forest covered more than 81 per cent of its geographical area. With development, major industries like pulp and paper mill, a plywood factory and a chain of hydroelectric dams sprouted in the area. These industries overexploited the forest resources, and the dams submerged huge-forest and agricultural areas. By 1980 the forest had shrunk to about 25 per cent of the district's area. The Appiko Movement was a response to this crisis and tries to save the Western Ghats.

Most movements have realized the importance of women in environmental protection after the Chipko movement. Important movements that are largely driven by women are Deccan Development Society in Telangana started in the year 1983 that works in sustainable agriculture; Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India, a collective of over two million poor women, working to adopt small-scale clean technologies, such as clean cook stoves and solar lanterns; Navadanya which means 'nine seeds' focuses on biodiversity and traditional seed banks. All these are women centred movements for the protection of environment, livelihoods and for biological and cultural diversity.

The Deccan Development society is projecting a working model for the people oriented participative development in the areas of food security, ecological agriculture, and alternate education. The society largely works with women's collectives or Sanghas. It is also trying to reverse the historical process of degradation of the environment and people's livelihood system in this semi-arid region through a string of land related activities such as Perma-culture, Community Grain Bank, Community Gene Fund, Community Green Fund and Collective Cultivation through land Lease etc. The Society is trying to reclaim the people's knowledge in the area of health and agriculture.

SEWA in Gujarat, involves and trains women in water harvesting, building capacity to manage and maintain water systems and, educating and creating awareness. Through the establishment of women's collectives at the community level, SEWA could help communities gain access to existing government programmes. Grassroots women (200,000) in over 500 villages of semi-arid regions of Gujarat are playing a leading role in water campaign activities such as revival of traditional water sources (village and farm ponds), rainwater harvesting at household and community level, watershed development and maintenance of state-owned hand pumps and pipe lines. Vandana Shiva founded Navadanya in 1982 to encourage traditional farming practices. Navadanya is an organisation promoting biodiversity conservation and organic farming. The organisation has not only helped create markets for farmers, but also promoted quality organic food for consumers.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA)

One of India's longest environmental struggles is the NBA, that started in the 1985 and continues to this day. The NBA is India's largest mass movement protesting against the construction of huge dams on the Narmada river, the largest river flowing into the Arabian Sea. The proposed Sardar Sarovar Dam and Narmada Sagar will displace more than 250,000 people, submerge over 25 villages and forests. While the anti- dam movement began by protests from small farmers and adivasis spread across Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, it got a momentum with the coming of Medha Patkar. She formed the NBA in 1989, and has been involved since in the struggles of the people to stall the dam. Under Medha Patkar, the NBA uses Gandhian means to protest, that are non-violent and raises larger questions of the ills of modern development.

The NBA questions India's track record on resettlement of displaced people since independence. Displacement is gendered and women are the worst hit in such situations. Any displacement reinforces the existing situation of women's lack of ownership of land and property. Men are treated as heads of household and all compensation is given to them. The impact of displacement adversely affects women with loss of traditional sources of livelihood, and further marginalizes them in the labour force. Critiques of development led displacement inform the NBA and give it wide publicity not only in India but also globally.

Women Environmentalists

Some well known Indian women environmentalists are :

- Amrita Devi -- Bishnois Struggle to save Khejri tree
- Bachni Devi and Gaura Devi -- Chipko movement
- Medha Patkar -- NBA
- Sunita Narain -- Centre for Science and Environment
- Vandana Shiva – Activist, Navadanya
- Aruna Roy – Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)
- Rashida Bee and Champa Devi Shukla – Bhopal Gas Tragedy
- Maneka Gandhi – Animal Rights activist; Minister in BJP Govt.
- Sugatha Kumari – Poet; Silent Valley
- And many more.....

Environmental Policies and Women

The gendering of social processes and institutions, and the dominance of values, attitudes and behaviours culturally defined as masculine, influence significantly the conceptualization of environmental problems and the formulation of policies designed to address them. Understanding women's and men's relationships to the environment plays an important role in framing policies for more sustainable use of natural resources. We need to explore the complex linkages and intersections of gender with policy, politics, environmental exploitation and sustainable resource use globally. Gender sensitive policies are those that seek to achieve

environmental outcomes while explicitly taking into account both men's and women's opinions, needs, and interests.

There is now available an Environment Gender Index (EGI) that ranks countries on how they are translating gender and environment mandates into national policy and planning. The Scandinavian countries perform very well with high scores of EGI, suggesting an integration of gender concerns into environment policies. Out of 72 countries that were ranked on EGI, India is ranked 46. In the 1980s, governments and development agencies became much more aware of the need to consider gender issues in their environmental and natural resource management programmes. Policy makers first came to appreciate that women 'play an essential role in the management of natural resources, including soil, water, forests and energy...and often have a profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world around them'. (World Bank, 1991). While global environmental policies and projects reflect this change, in India a gender perspective still does not inform policy in meaningful ways.

Most environmental policies in India perceive women as either saviours, as victims and as the problem—each of which has differing policy implications. Donor agencies and governments began to recognise women as managing their environment on a daily basis, with different needs of resources from men. Social forestry schemes have been redesigned, recognising the diverse uses of tree products and different species preferences of men and women: men typically want timber for construction and fencing, while women need fodder and fuelwood. In water and sanitation activities, women's participation on water committees or in maintaining facilities is becoming the rule rather than the exception. Wasteland development projects in India (such as the Bankora projects in West Bengal) have successfully supported women's group efforts to regenerate forest and improve land productivity. They also build on women's greater use rights over common property than on privatised lands. Policies in community forestry, social forestry, water management and sustainable agriculture are specifically directed at women.

Such understandings have resulted in policies on environment in India acknowledging the contribution of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendment Act in India has given women 33% reservation in decision making bodies in both rural and urban areas. Panchayats, Vana Samarakshana Samitis, Water Users Associations all now see women members. The Self Help Groups (SHGs) that are spread all over the country provide another large platform for implementing policies on environment. The empowerment of women that has been a critical part of development discourse in recent decades in India, has drawn attention to the need for gender sensitive policies.

Initiatives to incorporate a gender perspective into environmental policies and programs in India, need to focus on first building a data base on sex disaggregated data. Data on gender inequalities needs to improve and be available, for policies to then take note. Women have to be more visible in decision making and green governance, through both representation and participation. As Bina Agarwal argues, environmental policies do not succeed as women are not seen as key partners in green governance.

There is growing realization that for policies to do better in the developing world they need to adopt a participatory approach. In this direction, NGOs play an important role in acting as pressure groups in the framing and implementation of policies, and in facilitating women's participation in deeply stratified societies. Many public policies are now decentralized to enable participation by local stakeholders. Most environmental policies encourage participation by local women as they recognize this helps proper implementation. But studies show that women continue to be invisible in decision making, thus constraining the functioning of participatory environmental policy. Efforts to include women in environmental policy in more engaging ways need to be conceptualised in the Indian context, keeping in mind the levels of social stratification that exist in our society.

Some major policies and programs on environment and their implications for women are briefly outlined.

- The National Environment Policy (2006) recognises that a diverse developing society such as ours provides numerous challenges in the economic, social, political, cultural, and environmental arenas. All of these coalesce in the dominant imperative of alleviation of mass poverty, reckoned in the multiple dimensions of livelihood security, health care, education, empowerment of the disadvantaged, and elimination of gender disparities.
- National Forest Policy 1988 and Joint Forest Management (JFM) program of the 1990s mandated that women comprise 33% of the membership of the Vana Samarakshana Samitis. This inclusion of women to a large extent explains the success of the program in different states. The logic behind its creation was that the problem of deforestation could be better handled if the state Forest Departments worked out joint management agreements with local communities to reforest degraded forest
- Biodiversity Act 2002 – sees important role for women as stakeholders and custodians of traditional knowledge. Historically, women have been the seed keepers in farming communities.
- Water harvesting programs across India see more women participants working in partnership with the state and NGOs. Water has gender dimensions. Women and men derive different benefits from its availability, use and management. Women were active participants in the Sukhomajri village in Shivalik range of the Himalaya in Haryana that earned nation-wide acclaim for the way in which they had utilised their forests and water to their benefit. When women are involved in water management decisions the community benefits. Gujarat Water Policy (2002) too mentions that women are the most interested users of rural water supply, domestic urban water consumption, in health and sanitation issues as well as agricultural production and sees a crucial role for grassroots women in local water management.
- Renewable energy policies in rural areas address women in households with biogas plants and solar cookers / panels. Poor women need to benefit from clean and green cooking energy. Policymakers need to recognize the importance of women in the

energy sector and to engage them directly in policy making and project design. Energy policies and programmes that recognize women's work and roles in the energy sector, can be effective in promoting access to sustainable energy solutions.

Summary

This module has discussed the role of women in environmental movements, particularly in India. It is evident that India has a long history of the involvement of women in environmental causes. In fact, the Chipko movement spearheaded many such movements by women to save the forests, like Green Belt in Kenya, Save the Rainforest in the Amazon and Appiko in the Western Ghats. Women have a stake in conserving environment as they depend on it not just for livelihood but also for daily needs of the household (water, fuelwood and fodder).

Gender inequality exists quite sharply in India, as evident from the fact that ownership of land and property is largely with men. Women in movements are fighting to correct this imbalance. Women are not just victims, but also key agents of change in environmental issues. The exclusion of women in policies is related to the gender politics that privilege men and make women invisible. This is now changing slowly with the mandatory representation of women in local government bodies that has seen a surge in membership of grassroots women. Women now collectively manage common resources, whether it is forests, grasslands, energy, seeds, water, soil or sustainable agriculture. Women can be key players in the move towards a more sustainable future and policy makers need to realise this. There needs to be shift from a mere focus on women as an object of policy, to a more nuanced engagement with gender in the framing of any policy.

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