

Vol III Issue VII April 2014

ISSN No : 2249-894X

*Monthly Multidisciplinary
Research Journal*

*Review Of
Research Journal*

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2249-894X

Review Of Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial Board readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

*As the world moves forward at a phenomenal speed with scientific and technological advancements, the environmental crisis is escalating at an alarming rate and there is a growing feeling that civil society must be consulted in environmental and developmental initiatives. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) include religious, traditional, farmers', women's, academic and professional, civic, microfinancing, rights claiming, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as trade unions. Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Women are in the forefront of the race for protection and preservation of the resources. This paper will focus on the feminist interventions and activism to environmental protection and sustainable development. This paper also highlights several environmental movements spearheaded by feminist environmentalists both at the national and international level. Among the main environmental movements, Bishnoi's led by Amrita Devi to protect Khejadli (*Prosopis cinraria*) trees in Rajasthan, Chipko Movement in the Himalayas, Save the Narmada Movement (Narmada Bachao Andolan) in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat; the Appiko Movement in the Western Ghats, Save Silent Valley in Malabar region of South India and Kenya's Green Belt Movement are discussed. Most of the environmental movements have emerged in response to projects that threaten to dislocate people and to affect their basic human rights to land, water, and ecological stability of life-support systems. Roles played individually by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Rachel Carson and Mrs. Brundtland for environmental protection are also discussed.*

KEY WORDS:

Environmental crisis, Environmental Protection, Sustainable Development, Women.

INTRODUCTION

As the world moves forward at a phenomenal speed with scientific and technological advancements, the environmental crisis is escalating at an alarming rate and there is a growing feeling that civil society must be consulted in environmental and developmental initiatives. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) include religious, traditional, farmers', women's, academic and professional, civic, micro-financing, rights claiming, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as trade unions. Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Women are in the forefront of the race for protection and preservation of the resources.

Title: " FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ", Source: Review of Research [2249-894X] Anju yr:2014 | vol:3 | iss:7

ROLE OF WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AT NATIONAL LEVEL

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. Women in India are playing a crucial role in protection and conservation of environment. The environmental movements in India has a very long history that goes well into India's past. Some of the Indian Environmental movements in the past and present are discussed emphasizing the role played by women.

Bishnois: The Bishnois are a community of nature worshippers in the state of Rajasthan. The protection of trees is a religious obligation. Guju Jambeshwarji founded the Bishnoi religion in 1542 AD. Bishnois follow 29 tenets, which are designed to conserve the biodiversity and ensure a healthy eco-friendly social life. The direct concern of Indian women with environment protection can be traced long back to 1737 AD, when Amrita Devi Bishnoi of Khejaralli village of Jodhpur District of Rajasthan sacrificed her life for saving the Khejadli (*Prosopis cinraria*) trees of her village. Bishnois led by Amrita Devi, hugged the Khejadli trees to protect them with their bodies when soldiers of Maharaja of Jodhpur wanted to cut the trees. As soldiers kept on killing villagers, more and more of the Bishnois came forward to honour the religious injunction of their Guru Maharaj Jambaji. The massacre continued until 363 persons were killed defending Khejadli trees. While this massacre was on, children, women and men kept chanting Guru's (Jambho Ji) one of teachings "*Sar Santey Rookh Rahe To Bhi Sasto Jaan*" (*If a tree is saved even at the cost of one's head, it's worth it*) (Sharma, 1999). Later, when Maharaja came to know about it, he apologized for his action and issued a royal decree engraved on a copper plate, prohibiting the cutting of trees and hunting of animals in all Bishnoi villages (Sharma, 1999). Recognizing the sacrifice of Amrita Bishnoi, Government of India (Ministry of Environment and Forests) has initiated the national award "Amrita Devi Bishnoi Wildlife Protection" for significant contribution in the field of wildlife protection (MOEF website). This movement by Bishnoi women has inspired many other movements against unbridled exploitation of natural resources and environmental neglect.

Chipko Movement: The sacrifices made by Bishnois became the inspiration for the Chipko movement of 1973 in Uttarakhand (India) which is among the first environmentalist movements inspired by women. In the chipko movement, which is concerned with preservation of forests and maintenance of ecological balance in the sub-Himalayan region, an important role has been played by women of Garhwal region (Jain, 1984). Bachni Devi and Gaura Devi and many village women of Uttar Pradesh first saved trees by hugging them in the 'Chipko embrace'. 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 forests. Some commentators have described chipko movement as Women's movement. In, 1974 an especially notable confrontation occurred in Reni Village in Uttarakhand, where a women's group, led by Mrs. Gaura Devi, blocked an army of lumberjacks, singing: "This forest is our mother's home; we will protect it with all our might" (Singhal and Lubjuhn, 2010). By facing the men squarely, she and her companions forced them to retreat. Following this demonstration of strength by women, the Uttar Pradesh government decided to set a committee of experts to investigate the situation and the lumber company withdrew its men from Reni to wait for the committee's decision. The committee after two years reported that Reni was a sensitive area and government put a ban on all tree felling in the Reni forest tract (Jain, 1984). In Chipko movement the women would hold hands and form a circle around the tree, hugging it as a group. The Chipko movement in India is probably the most famous of the ecofeminist movements in world. Sunderlal Bahuguna- the leader of Chipko movement was awarded '*The Right Livelihood Award*' in 1987 for its dedication to the conservation, restoration and ecologically sound use of India's Natural resources (Right Livelihood Award Foundation website).

APPIKO MOVEMENT:

In Kannada, Appiko means "hug the trees." The Appiko movement in the western Ghats was similar to the Chipko movement in the Himalayas. Just as Chipko is essentially a movement of women, so also women, especially those of the younger generation, were instrumental in launching Appiko. On September 8, 1983, about 30 women gathered in Salkani village. With 70 men, they walked eight kilometers to reach Kalase forest. On the site of tree felling, these women hugged the trees, the laborers were shocked and left their axes and saws and returned to their huts. The Appiko movement spread to eight

forest areas and successfully stopped tree felling. Mahila Mandal of Kerehosahalli village in north Kanara district, Karnataka. Women of different castes, including adivasi women, were members of Mahila Mandal. The main source of funds for Appiko activists was generated by women. Each woman kept aside a handful of grain every day as a contribution to the movement. At the end of the month, the Appiko activist collected the grain which is used for the upkeep of the activist. The grain was also used for shivirs or camps, and for those who keep watch in the forests to prevent tree felling. Women's support to the movement had been both practical and creative (Hegde, 1984).

SAVE SILENT VALLEY MOVEMENT:

The Silent Valley, one of the few remaining undisturbed tropical rain-forest areas in India, lies in the Malabar region, the least-developed section of the state of Kerala, at the southern end of the western Ghats. Many rare species of plants, ferns, and endangered fauna survive in the valley (Karan, 1994). During the early 1960s the state government of Kerala began planning a hydroelectric project for the power hungry state on the Kuntipuzha River, which flows through the valley, to generate hydroelectricity as the basis for regional economic development.

An NGO of Kerala called Kerala Sastraiya Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) raised their voice to stop the silent valley Hydro Project in 1978. The group opposed the project with a campaign that brought into sharp focus the ecological consequences, specifically the possibility of extinction of species that had evolved over millions of years. The environmentalist objected to the project and filed a case in High court, which they lost. After years of activism the movement persuaded the Indian government to appoint a high-level committee to examine the project's environmental and socioeconomic effects. The committee subsequently recommended abandonment of the scheme (Swaminathan, 1979), which the state government accepted in 1983. The project was cancelled by personal interventions of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. In 1980, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi told the state government to abandon the project. She declared the area a National Park and by 1984 was in place to ensure that status (Chengappa, 2009). The Malayalam poet and key figure to the save the silent valley, Sugathakumari played an important role in protest and her poem "Marathinu Stuthi" (Ode to a Tree) became a symbol for the protest from the intellectual community and was the opening song/prayer of most of the "save the Silent Valley" campaign meetings. Today, the virgin forest and unparalleled beauty of the park bear silent testimony to what a determined band of environmentally conscious individuals can achieve if they combine forces (Chengappa, 2009).

Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA): India's Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a social movement that arose in response to the building of a World Bank-funded dam project along the Narmada River the role played by Medha Patkar is pivotal. Medha Patkar is well-known the world over as a powerful voice of millions of the voiceless poor and oppressed people. Medha Patkar has received numerous awards, including the Deena Nath Mangeshkar Award, Mahatma Phule Award, Goldman Environment Prize, Green Ribbon Award for Best International Political Campaigner by BBC, and the Human Rights Defender's Award from Amnesty International. She is also one of the recipients of the Right Livelihood Award (the alternative Nobel Peace prize) for the year 1991. She has served as a Commissioner to the World Commission on Dams, the first independent global commission constituted to enquire on the water, power and alternative issues, related to dams, across the world. Medha Patkar has been a central organizer and strategist of NBA, a people's movement organized to stop the construction of a series of dams planned for India's largest westward flowing river, the Narmada (Prasad, 2007).

Mrs. Indira Gandhi as an Environmentalist:

As Prime Minister, there was in Indira Gandhi a sense of engagement with issues of the environment during both her tenures in office from January 1966 to March 1977, and again from January 1980 till her assassination in October 1984 (Rangrajan, 2006). Ms. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India participated in the historic United Nations Conference on Human Environment, at Stockholm in 1972 and singled out poverty as the main cause for environmental Pollution by stating "Are not the poverty and need the greatest polluters"? in her plenary speech at the conference. (Only One Earth, 1972). During her tenure, the Water Prevention and Control of Pollution Act was passed in 1974. Under this act, pollution control boards were established at the Central and state level were established. The Department of Environment, created in 1980, performed an oversight role for the central government. As discussed above, Mrs. Gandhi played a significant role in cancellation of silent valley hydro project. In a meeting of naturalists in Bombay, in Salim Ali's presence, she told that regional aspirations for power and water had to be balanced with the need for preservation (Gandhi, 1983). In 1977, she issued orders for the comprehensive environmental impact assessments of all large and medium irrigation projects (Khagram,

2005).

To give recognition to her contribution to environment, in 1986, "Indira Priyadarshini Vrikshamitre Award" was constituted to recognize the outstanding contributions of individuals and organizations in the field of forestation and wasteland development. In 1987, the Ministry instituted an award called "Indira Gandhi Paryavaran Puraskar". to give recognition to those having made or having the potential to make measurable and major impact in the protection of environment (MOEF, website). Mrs. Indira Gandhi was honored with IUCN's highest conservation award, the John C. Phillips Memorial Medal in 1984 for distinguished service in international conservation (IUCN website). Awarded in memory of the life and work of Dr John C. Phillips, a pioneer of the conservation movement and specialist in species classification and genetics, it is in recognition of outstanding service in international conservation. Her deep sensitivity to the environment has played a critical role for environmental protection.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AT INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

Rachel Carson - (1907-1964) a scientist, writer, and ecologist focused on effects of chemicals and pesticides on the environment and wrote her book about environment, *Silent Spring* which started a modern environmental movement. *Silent Spring* (1962) by Rachel Carson focused attention on the effects of pollution on human and non human world, making the question of life on earth a public issue. This book initiated a transformation between human beings and natural world and stirred an awakening of public environmental consciousness.

If a civilization is judged by the wisdom of its ways, the 21st century owes considerable gratitude to one woman, Rachel Carson, whose book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, revolutionized how people understand their relationship with the natural environment. Specifically, *Silent Spring* explained how indiscriminate application of agricultural chemicals, pesticides, and other modern chemicals polluted our streams, damaged bird and animal populations, and caused severe medical problems for humans. Carson and her book are frequently cited as the catalysts that inspired the environmental movement, including the establishment of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the passing of numerous laws protecting the environment and human health. Since the publication of *Silent Spring*, the chemistry discipline has grown to include green chemistry—the design, development, and implementation of chemical products and processes that reduce or eliminate the use or generation of substances hazardous to human health and the environment—and a new role for chemists in investigating the impact of human activity on the environment.

Carson, who died in 1964, inspired a new paradigm of thinking—where humanity is not the centre of life on earth, but part of nature. At a time when humans largely believed themselves to be apart from nature and destined to control it, Carson argued passionately that nature is, in fact, a network of interconnections and interdependencies and that humans are a part of that network and threaten its cohesion at their own peril. ...What is mainstream today was heretical in 1962, and this part of Carson's argument is what earned her such enmity when *Silent Spring* was published (Baum, 2007). The thinking of Carson was much beyond the time as and it has been very appropriately written by Rachel Carson:

"Considering the whole span of earthly time... Only within the moment of time represented by the present century has one species – man – acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world."
— Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962)

The legacy of *Silent Spring* continues today in the scientific community's increased focus on environmentally friendly practices and the public's heightened support for sustainability in all areas of our lives (Bishop, 2012). The American Chemical Society designated the legacy of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as a National Historic Chemical Landmark in a ceremony in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, during the Rachel Carson Legacy Conference on October 26, 2012.

Gro Harlem Brundtland:

In 1983, the Secretary-General of the United Nations invited Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, a medical doctor, master of public health and former Prime Minister of Norway, to establish and chair a World Commission on Environment and Development (UN, 2014). In April 1987, the Brundtland Commission, as it came to be known, published its groundbreaking report, "Our Common Future" — which brought the concept of sustainable development into the public discourse. Also known as the Brundtland report, *Our Common Future* included the "classic" definition of sustainable development: "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations

FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

to meet their own needs” (WCED, p. 43). The Brundtland Commission report – *Our Common Future* – addressed the links between development and environment, and challenged policy-makers to consider the interrelationships among environment, economic and social issues when it comes to solving global problems. The report examined emerging global challenges in: population and human resources; food security; species and ecosystems; energy; industry; and urbanization. The landmark 1987 Brundtland Commission report – *Our Common Future* – placed sustainable development much higher on the international policy agenda and identified the basis of sustainable development strategies.

Kenya's Green Belt Movement: Another environmental movement in Kenya, 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. This environmental campaign resulted in the mobilization of thousands of women planting indigenous trees. The Movement has created a national network of 6,000 village nurseries, designed to combat creeping desertification, restore soil health and protect water catchment areas. The 50,000 women members of the Movement have planted about 20 million trees. The movement has always sought to address issues of gender disparities, and food security in combination with environmental protection. The movement's work has spread to other countries through the Pan-African Green Network (Maathai, 2003). The Green Belt movement aims to bring environmental restoration in Kenya's rapidly diminishing forests as well as empowering the rural women through environmental preservation along with society's economic growth.

These environmental movements both at the international and national level are an expression of the socio-ecological effects of narrowly conceived development based on short-term criteria of exploitation. The movements are revealing how the resource-intensive demands of development have built-in ecological destruction and economic deprivation.

CONCLUSION

In terms of the environment, women around the world play distinct roles: in managing plants and animals in forests, drylands, wetlands and agriculture; in collecting water, fuel and fodder for domestic use and income generation; and in overseeing land and water resources. By so doing, they contribute time, energy, skills and personal visions to family and community development. Women's extensive experience makes them an invaluable source of knowledge and expertise on environmental management and appropriate actions. The women are alert to environmental changes, and they respond readily and knowledgeably to the need to protect the environment. It has been said “*The environmental crisis is an outward manifestation of the crisis of mind and spirit*”. It all depends upon how do we think and act. If we want to check the environmental crisis, we will have to transform our thinking and attitude. That in turn would transform our deeds, leading to a better environment and better future. Sustainable development is only possible where economic growth, social justice and equity, and environmental integrity are achieved. Any government at its own level cannot achieve the goals of sustainable development until the public has a participatory role in it. Public participation is possible only when the public is aware about the ecological and environmental issues. We must have to arouse public by addressing their needs, emotions and values, whether, moral, sacred, nationalistic, or other. Changing public opinion can bring changes in governmental policies, which transform into action later.

Mother, who is considered as the first teacher of an individual can play a vital role in giving the non-formal education by inculcating environmental ethics in all the citizens and sensitize the minds of people. Environmental ethics inculcate a precious code in the individuals and societies and ought to be developed in each person, to command him/her as a force from within to make decisions and take actions on the different aspects of the environment which are not harmful to the local, national and international community. Various Environmental movements at both the national and international levels show that women are more sensitive to the earth and its problems. They have created a special value system about environmental issues. Movements all over the world that are dedicated to the continuation of life, like Chipko movement in India, Green Belt movement in Kenya are all labeled as "ecofeminist" movements. Historically, women's intimate knowledge of nature has helped to sustain life. Women are victims of environmental degradation as well as active agents in the regeneration and protection of the environment.

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