

# Ecofeminism And Environmental Justice In India: Exploring Women's Contributions To Sustainable Development And Policy Advocacy

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## ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism in India connects environmental justice with gender equality by acknowledging the interrelation of women's issues and ecological challenges. This paper examines the substantial contributions of Indian women to sustainable development and policy advocacy from an ecofeminist perspective. It examines the historical development, theoretical underpinnings, significant movements, and the involvement of women in environmental policy formulation and community leadership within the Indian context. It also analyses the obstacles women encounter in their environmental advocacy and provides legislative solutions to promote a more inclusive and equitable approach to sustainable development.

## Introduction

India confronts substantial issues with environmental degradation and gender inequality. Rapid industrialisation, deforestation, and climate change have intensified the vulnerabilities of marginalised populations, particularly impacting women disproportionately. Ecofeminism, which originated globally in the 1970s, gained significant momentum in India, where women have historically served as custodians of natural resources and proponents of sustainable practices. Women's distinctive connection to the environment, stemming from their responsibilities in agriculture, resource management, and caregiving, renders them essential participants in India's quest for sustainable development. Indian ecofeminism merges environmental issues with feminist ideology, emphasising the importance of resolving gender inequalities to attain ecological sustainability. Women, particularly in marginalised areas, are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation and climate change, rendering their participation in sustainability initiatives crucial for attaining enduring ecological equilibrium.

## Historical Evolution of Ecofeminism in India

Ecofeminism is feminist philosophy and action influenced by ecology. Ecofeminism is concerned with the relationship between female dominance and natural dominance (Howell, 1997). Ecofeminism in India has developed as a distinctive combination of environmentalism and feminism, grounded in the nation's profound natural heritage and socio-cultural context. The historical development of ecofeminism in India originates from indigenous knowledge systems and the interdependent relationship that women, especially from rural and tribal communities, have sustained with nature (Khanduja, 2017). These women have historically been instrumental in the stewardship of natural resources, utilising their experiential knowledge and cultural insights. Nonetheless, the emergence of colonial exploitation and subsequent developmental policies exacerbated the marginalisation of both women and the environment, establishing the foundation for ecofeminist opposition (Swami, 2003).

The modern ecofeminist movement in India accelerated in the 1970s, marked by the Chipko Movement, which garnered international focus on the nexus between gender and environmental concerns. Women in the Himalayan region, spearheaded by grassroots activists such as Gaura Devi, adopted the ideology of tree-hugging to combat deforestation and safeguard their livelihoods (Shiva & Bandyopadhyay, 1986). Their struggle underscored how deforestation and the commercial exploitation of forests disproportionately impacted women, who relied on trees for fuel, feed, and water. The movement emphasised that ecological degradation is intrinsically connected to patriarchal and capitalist systems that abuse both women and nature for profit (Rangan, 2000).

Ecofeminism in India gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s, with campaigners such as Vandana Shiva advocating for sustainable agriculture and biodiversity preservation. Her analysis criticised the Green Revolution's focus on industrialised agriculture, which marginalised small-scale farmers and resulted in soil degradation and genetic erosion. Shiva and other ecofeminists underscored the significance of traditional agricultural methods, seed sovereignty, and the role of women as stewards of ecological knowledge. They contended that global corporate interests sustained ecological degradation and gender disparities, underscoring the necessity for a more inclusive, eco-centric development paradigm (Shiva & Mies, 2014).

The Indian ecofeminist rhetoric has been influenced by opposition to large-scale industrial initiatives, like dam construction and mining, which have resulted in the displacement of indigenous communities and significant environmental repercussions (Passantino, 2017). Women from marginalised communities, especially Dalits and Adivasis, have led these initiatives, highlighting the nexus between environmental justice and social justice. Grassroots movements have illustrated how environmental degradation intensifies existing social inequities and how women, as primary carers and resource managers, disproportionately suffer from ecological crises. In recent years, ecofeminism in India has developed to include concerns like as climate change, urban environmental difficulties, and the effects of globalisation on local ecosystems and people. Women-led movements persist in campaigning for legislative reforms that promote sustainable and equitable development methods, acknowledging women's roles in environmental protection (Allen et al., 2019). The increasing recognition of climate justice has bolstered the ecofeminist movement, establishing it as a crucial element in India's environmental and gender dialogue. Ecofeminism in India persistently contests prevailing paradigms and promotes a harmonious coexistence between mankind and nature through action, academia, and policy advocacy.

### **Theoretical Foundations of Ecofeminism in India**

Ecofeminism in India is founded on a synthesis of indigenous knowledge, spiritual traditions, and contemporary feminist theory, providing a distinctive theoretical framework that integrates environmental and gender issues. The intellectual foundations of Indian ecofeminism are rooted in the nation's ancient traditions, which venerate nature as a maternal figure and guardian of life (Low & Tremayne, 2001). This cultural paradigm imparts a spiritual aspect to ecofeminism, perceiving the exploitation of women and the environment as interrelated kinds of oppression. Indian ecofeminism's theoretical viewpoints challenge androcentrism and anthropocentrism, which prioritise economic expansion at the expense of ecological balance and gender justice (Tizzoni, 2018).

The impact of Western ecofeminist theory, especially the writings of scholars such as Carolyn Merchant and Vandana Shiva, has significantly enhanced the theoretical framework of ecofeminism in India. These viewpoints underscore the influence of capitalist and patriarchal systems on the deterioration of women and the environment, stressing the necessity for a comprehensive approach to development. Indian ecofeminism transcends Western paradigms by integrating the experiences of marginalised populations, especially Dalits and Adivasis, whose challenges are interlinked with environmental and gender-based oppression (Rao, 2012). The theoretical discourse incorporates intersectionality, acknowledging how various layers of oppression influence women's relationship with nature.

A fundamental theoretical component of Indian ecofeminism is its critique of development strategies that favour industrialisation and economic expansion to the detriment of ecological sustainability and social fairness. Academics and advocates contend that the purported advancements resulting from these measures have marginalised women by dislocating them from their conventional responsibilities as environmental custodians. The notion of sustainable development in Indian ecofeminism is intrinsically linked to women's empowerment and community-oriented resource management. It contests the prevailing development paradigm by promoting decentralised and locally-driven solutions that honour ecological boundaries and gender equality (Véron, 2001).

The theoretical basis of Indian ecofeminism is also informed by grassroots movements that have arisen in reaction to environmental degradation and displacement. Movements like Chipko and Narmada Bachao Andolan offer empirical support for the ecofeminist assertion that women, particularly in rural regions, possess profound ecological knowledge and are key stakeholders in environmental preservation. These movements have fostered the emergence of an ecofeminist praxis that integrates theory and activism, highlighting the significance of lived experiences and community-oriented resistance to environmental injustices. Modern Indian ecofeminism is progressively developing by integrating international discussions on climate justice, sustainable livelihoods, and ecological democracy (Kothari, 2014). It opposes the prevailing neoliberal agenda that commodifies natural resources and sustains gender disparities, while promoting a more inclusive and participatory approach to environmental governance (Kapoor, 2001).

Indian ecofeminist theory proposes an alternative development model that emphasises the interdependence of living systems while advocating for justice, sustainability, and equity. Ecofeminism in India, via the integration of traditional knowledge, feminist ideology, and environmental activism, articulates a robust critique of the current socio-economic system and proposes avenues for a more peaceful and sustainable future.

### **Women's Contributions to Sustainable Development in India**

Women in India have significantly contributed to sustainable development through their involvement in environmental protection, resource management, and community-based activities. Women, particularly in rural and indigenous communities, serve as primary carers and resource managers, with profound ecological knowledge that underpins sustainable practices. They engage in traditional agricultural practices, water conservation strategies, and biodiversity preservation, fostering ecological equilibrium while securing food availability and sustainable livelihoods. Their participation in these activities underscores the vital connection between gender and sustainability, illustrating that women's empowerment is essential for attaining enduring environmental objectives (Agarwal et al., 2020).

Women in agriculture have been in the forefront of implementing and safeguarding sustainable agricultural practices that emphasise organic methods, crop diversification, and seed preservation. Their function in conventional agricultural practices, including terrace farming and organic composting, has aided in preserving soil fertility and enhancing resilience to climate change. Women-led initiatives, including seed banks in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, have contributed to the conservation of indigenous crop types and diminished reliance on chemical inputs (Tripp & Pal, 2001). By advocating for sustainable agricultural practices, women not only support their communities but also contest the industrial farming paradigm that frequently results in environmental harm and socioeconomic disparities.

Women have been pivotal in community-driven environmental initiatives that oppose unsustainable development practices and promote ecological justice. The Chipko Movement and the Narmada Bachao Andolan exemplify instances where women assumed prominent roles in forest conservation and resistance against large dam projects jeopardising local ecosystems and livelihoods. These movements highlight the importance of women's leadership in promoting policies that reconcile development with environmental preservation. Women's engagement has highlighted the interrelation between ecological sustainability and social well-being, advocating for a development paradigm that honours both environment and human rights (Borràs, 2016).

Women have played a significant role in creating alternative energy solutions and fostering ecologically sustainable firms within the realm of renewable energy and sustainable lives. Initiatives like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and Barefoot College have enabled women to assume roles as solar engineers, craftspeople, and entrepreneurs in sustainable sectors (Mininni, 2020). These measures have facilitated economic independence and diminished dependence on non-renewable energy sources, so aiding climate change mitigation efforts. Women-led cooperatives in handicrafts, organic products, and waste management have exhibited the capacity for sustainable economic models that correspond with environmental preservation and social fairness.

Notwithstanding their achievements, women persistently encounter obstacles including restricted access to resources, insufficient decision-making authority, and socio-cultural impediments that obstruct their comprehensive involvement in sustainable development initiatives. To tackle these difficulties, it is essential to implement specific policies that foster gender-responsive strategies for sustainability, guaranteeing women's access to education, financial resources, and involvement in environmental governance (Chauhan & H. M., 2016). Enhancing women's leadership in sustainable development can cultivate more resilient communities and promote an inclusive strategy for tackling environmental and developmental issues in India. Their contributions underscore the necessity of incorporating gender considerations into sustainability frameworks to attain a just and equitable future for all.

### **Women in Environmental Policy Advocacy in India**

The participation of women in environmental policymaking in India has resulted in significant alterations in governance and policy structures. Their campaigning has impacted national laws, including the Forest Rights Act and the National Policy for Empowerment of Women, assuring the incorporation of gender considerations into environmental governance. Grassroots organisations led by women, such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and the Kudumbashree movement in Kerala, have advocated for environmental sustainability alongside economic development (Kumaramkandath & Verghese, 2016). Women have been instrumental in shaping community-based forest management strategies and have led efforts to oppose industrial projects that jeopardise ecological stability and local livelihoods. Indian women have exhibited tenacity and leadership in environmental policymaking, fighting for a more inclusive and participatory approach to sustainability, despite encountering several obstacles.

Women in India have become essential participants in environmental policy advocacy, leveraging their lived experiences and profound connection to natural resources. In numerous rural communities, women serve as the principal collectors of water, fuelwood, and other necessities from the environment, rendering them highly cognisant of ecological degradation. This grassroots viewpoint frequently shapes their advocacy, since they emphasise the impact of environmental policies on marginalised communities and promote sustainable behaviours. The participation of women in environmental advocacy is influenced by traditional roles and knowledge systems that prioritise conservation and harmony with nature.

The Chipko Movement in the 1970s exemplifies a prominent instance of women-led environmental activism in India. Women in rural Uttarakhand physically embraced trees to thwart their destruction, contesting commercial forestry methods. This movement highlighted the ecological significance of forests and emphasised

the necessity for participatory environmental governance. It prompted a wider acknowledgement of women's efforts to environmental conservation, motivating like programs across.

In modern India, women significantly influence environmental policy through activism and involvement in decision-making entities. Gender gaps in education, land ownership, and political representation can impede their capacity to participate fully in policy-making processes. Societal conventions frequently devalue women's expertise and viewpoints, especially in male-dominated fields like energy and infrastructure development. Confronting these difficulties necessitates focused initiatives to empower women via education, capacity enhancement, and the establishment of forums for their participation in environmental decision-making. The increasing acknowledgement of women's contributions to environmental campaigning highlights the necessity of including gender factors into policy frameworks (Fletcher, 2018). By engaging women as active partners, India may develop more sustainable and equitable solutions to environmental issues. Their leadership enhances environmental dialogue and fortifies community resilience against climate change and ecological catastrophes. Empowering women in this field is not merely a question of equity; it is crucial for attaining enduring environmental sustainability.

### **Challenges Faced by Women in Environmental Advocacy in India**

Women in India encounter several obstacles in environmental campaigning, notwithstanding their substantial efforts. Patriarchal obstacles and gender prejudices frequently constrain women's involvement in decision-making, hindering their capacity to affect policies and obtain resources. Socio-cultural limitations and conventional gender roles impede women's complete participation in environmental advocacy. Resource limitations are a considerable problem, as women in rural regions sometimes lack the financial and technical assistance necessary to expand their projects. Moreover, female environmental defenders in India frequently encounter threats and harassment, with numerous individuals jeopardising their lives to safeguard natural resources and champion environmental justice. These problems highlight the necessity for enhanced support and acknowledgement of women's contributions to environmental advocacy, together with the establishment of legislation that tackle gender-specific obstacles to involvement.

Women engaged in environmental advocacy in India have several problems arising from systemic gender discrimination, socio-economic obstacles, and institutional deficiencies. These obstacles impede their involvement, leadership, and influence in tackling significant environmental concerns, although their essential role in resource management and conservation.

A key difficulty is the absence of representation and decision-making authority (Mendelberg & Karpowitz, 2016). Women frequently lack representation in policy-making entities, local governance, and environmental organisations, hence constraining their capacity to impact decisions that directly influence themselves and their communities. This is exacerbated by cultural and societal conventions that favour male leadership and diminish the value of women's expertise and contributions, especially in rural and traditional societies.

Economic obstacles present considerable difficulties. A significant number of women involved in environmental advocacy originate from marginalised and economically poor backgrounds, characterised by restricted access to education, financial resources, and technology. This limits their capacity to organise, create awareness, and engage successfully in advocacy initiatives. Moreover, the obligation of unpaid labour, including domestic duties and childcare, restricts women's time and energy for engagement in environmental activities.

The ownership of land and access to natural resources intensify these difficulties. In numerous regions of India, women do not possess solid land rights, despite being the principal users and custodians of natural resources. Their voices in resource management and policy discussions are frequently disregarded due to the absence of formal ownership or legal acknowledgement. This marginalisation diminishes their capacity to promote sustainable practices and equitable resource allocation.

Ultimately, female activists may encounter safety issues and repercussions, especially when confronting influential entities or established structures. Harassment, intimidation, and violence are prevalent, dissuading numerous individuals from engaging in environmental advocacy. The risks are exacerbated in areas where environmental concerns converge with political and business interests, rendering activism a hazardous pursuit for women.

Addressing these difficulties necessitates structural reforms, encompassing enhanced participation of women in decision-making positions, legal acknowledgement of their rights to resources, and focused capacity-building programs. Moreover, cultivating a supportive atmosphere via education, financial assistance, and safeguarding from violence is crucial for empowering women to engage significantly in environmental advocacy (Lazarus, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

Ecofeminism in India offers a powerful perspective on the intersection of gender and environmental justice, emphasising the critical role that women play in attempts to promote sustainability. Women have an important role in sustainable development and policy advocacy, which is crucial for addressing environmental issues. This highlights the need for women to be actively involved in environmental governance. Recognising and



supporting their actions can lead to environmental policies that are more inclusive and effective, ensuring a future that is sustainable and fair for all.

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