

Women Activists as Vanguard against threat to Environment

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Abstract

In developing countries like India, women are most the important users of natural resources like, forest, water and land, though they are not the owner of land in most families. In rural India, women are mostly responsible for collecting food, fuel and fodder and feeding the family members. For fire wood rural women collect the dead and dry branches of trees, which are uprooted by storm or natural disaster, rather than cutting the live trees; women work long hours in the field for farming. Even they use the courtyard as kitchen garden to produce green leafy vegetables for their family. So, they have to spend long hours working on the agricultural firm or forest. It leads them to gather knowledge about preservation of natural resources like, soil, plants, trees, and protect nature from misuse. Any kind of change-natural or man-made in the environment, like deforestation, global warming, affects women the most. So, many Indian women have initiated movements for protecting the environment and natural resources. About 300 years ago Amrita Devi, a woman of Bishnoi community of Rajasthan, India, protested against the felling of trees for building a palace for the Maharaja of Jodhpur. In March 1974, 27 women led by Gaura Devi hug the trees to prevent their cutting at Reni village in Tehri-Garhwal district of Uttarakhand (former Uttar Pradesh), which is popularly known as 'Chipko Movement'. Medha Patkar initiated the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) in 1989, to protect the Narmada River as well as, to protect human rights of a large number of displaced people affected by the construction of the Sardar Sarobar Dam. Sugathakumari founded 'Prakriti Samrakshana Samithi' which participated in the 'Save Silent Valley' protest movement in the Palakkad District of Kerala. In this paper, an attempt has been taken to uphold the life and work of renowned Indian women environment-activists who played a significant role and contributed towards protecting the environment.

Key Words: *Environment, protection, movement, women, nature.*

Introduction :

Women play a significant role in managing natural assets of forests, water and soil etc. They have to spend a long time with nature every day in collecting water, fire wood, vegetables and other forest products for livelihood. So, they gain a profound knowledge about Mother Nature. On the other hand, any kind of change-natural or man-made, in the environment, like, deforestation, global warming, has the most effect on women. So, many Indian women have initiated movements for protecting the environment and natural resources. The present paper is an attempt to uphold the life and work of renowned Indian women environment-activists who played a significant role and contributed towards protecting the environment.

Objectives:

There are two specific objectives of the present paper:

1. To explore and uphold the contribution of women environment-activists of India for environment protection.
2. To find out the impact of ecological movements in India initiated by the women environment activists.

Materials and methods:

This research is based on qualitative approach. It is biographic and analytical in nature. Historical and content analysis methods have been used in preparing this paper. The required information for this study has been collected from secondary sources of knowledge, such as books, newspapers of print and electronic media, articles, journals, websites and archives etc.

Discussion:

The role of women in the restoration and conservation of forest has been observed through their role in various ecological movements.

Supreme sacrifice of Amrita Devi in Bishnoi Movement:

The Bishnoi community has become famous for the Bishnoi Movement carried out for protection of environment in the beginning of the eighteenth century in India. In Bishnoi movement, the technique of embracing trees for their protection was employed for the first time by the leader Amrita Devi (Nepal, et.al. 2009). For the Bishnoi community, preservation of green trees, plants and other living beings is religion and part of their sacred tradition. Common people of Bishnoi community had resisted cutting of khejri trees under the leadership of Amrita Devi in 1700s at Khejarli and Marwar region of Rajasthan state of India. The Bishnoi people have been conserving the flora and fauna of western Rajasthan adjacent to the 'Thar Desert', for centuries. In the fifteenth century, a saint in a village near Jodhpur

named Sombaji alias Jambhoji, popularly known as Swami Jambheshwar Maharaj had envisaged that the cause of drought and extreme heat of that region was people's wrong interference with nature. He started a movement to protect the environment creating awareness among the villagers. He laid down 29 tenets to follow for the people of that region (Mangilal, 2020), most of which are dedicated to prevent harm to the Mother Nature. In local language of that region 'Bish' denotes 'twenty' and 'Noi' denotes 'Nine'. Thus, 'Bishnoi' denotes Twenty-nine principles. Those who follow twenty-nine principles from their heart are called 'BISHNOI'. Thus the sect 'Bishnoism' was founded by Guru Jambheshwar.

According to Indian Lunar calendar on the 10th of Bhadrapad 1730 A.D., while engaged in household activities (Mangilal, 2020), Amrita Devi was informed that a group of men were attempting to cut Khejarli trees for construction of a new palace for the Maharaja of Jodhpur. Instantly Amrita Devi reached there and embraced a tree. She instructed others to embrace trees to protect from felling down. Amrita Devi proclaimed that "A chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree" (Alam, et.al. 2018). A large number of people of the Bishnoi community from Khejarli and neighbouring villages came to the spot and each one embraced a tree to protect them. Each person embracing a tree, were brutally beheaded by the soldiers of Maharaja. A total of 363 Bishnois including three daughters of Amrita Devi namely, Asu, Ratni and Bhagu Bai became martyrs to prevent the felling of Khejarli trees (Mangilal, 2020). When the king came to know about this incident, he immediately reached the village and apologized. He ordered his soldiers to stop logging operations and declared it as a protected area. The supreme sacrifice of Amrita Devi and 363 Bishnois is an unforgettable instance of their devotion to protect nature. The strategy of hugging trees to protect them is still in existence and once again vibrantly practiced in modern Chipko movement in another region of India.

The major objectives of the Bishnoi movement was against deforestation; to preserve bio-diversity for protection of human species and other living beings; and to protect their forest rights for their livelihood.

Contribution of Gaura Devi in 'Chipko' movement:

One of the popular environment movements of 20th century India is the 'Chipko' movement in Garhwal Himalayan region, against deforestation. 'Chipko' is a Hindi word which means 'embrace'. The astonishing event of the movement took place on 26th March 1974. On that day, a group of women in Reni village of Uttarakhand, took the responsibility to prevent cutting of trees and embraced trees. They remained fixed to guard the trees constantly for some days until the wood cutters left.

The 'Chipko' movement has its roots during British rule in India. Many protest

activities were initiated by dwellers of Himalayan forests against the British forest policy. Their primary demand was to get forest rights, which continued up to the post-independent era. An almost similar British forest policy continued after independence of India. The origin of 'Chipko' movement was in 1973. In the same year, the forest department allotted 'ash' trees to Symonds Company, a private foreign company which referred to allot to a local cooperative organisation-'Dashauli Gram Swarajya Sangha' (DGSS), for making agricultural equipment. They protested against the injustice with local people. Chandi Prasad Bhat, the leader of DGSS suggested embracing trees for protecting them from felling down on 1st April 1973. The name 'Chipko' was evolved from the unique strategy of hugging trees as a non-violent means of protest action (Nepal, Padam 2009: 135-136). With this influential protest activity, the Company was forced to give up the contract. The success of the movement spread to other neighbouring areas and became popular nationally and internationally as Chipko movement (Reddy, Ratna V. 1998).

The objectives and demands of Chipko movement were: total stoppage of deforestation for commercial purpose; ensure community rights to natural resources of forests; keeping forests evergreen through tree plantation by the local people; formation of village committees for forest management; and growth of forest-based handicrafts industries etc. (Reddy, Ratna V. 1998).

The credit of the successful modern Chipko movement goes to Gaura Devi to a great extent. Under her leadership the local women had embraced the trees and prevented their cutting. Gaura Devi was the president of the Mahila Mangal Dal of Reni village. When the sawyer was about to start cutting trees, 27 women under the leadership of Gaura Devi stood against them. Almost all men of that village have been diverted intentionally towards Chamoli. Gaura Devi initially tried to talk with them politely to cease cutting trees, but the sawyer started abusing and threatening to the protesters. Gaura Devi instructed the protesting women to hug the trees to protect them. Gaura Devi considered the forest as her mother's house. She alongwith her associates kept guard of trees that night and next three or four days till other villagers joined the protest and the sawyer left. After that an expert committee was formed by the Uttar Pradesh Government to investigate the issue. The committee recommended preserving the ecologically rich Reni forest. The Uttar Pradesh government imposed ban on cutting trees for ten years in that area (Jain, Shobita, 1984).

In 1925, Gaura Devi was born in a small village called 'Laata' at the foothills of the Himalayas. Her family business was wool trading. She used to go with her mother to collect dry branches of trees for fire. Once, while collecting the twigs with her mother, Gaura Devi asked her mother, why they don't cut a big tree so that they need not collect twigs every

day? In reply her mother said, with the roots, the trees hold the earth with mountain sides, like holding the earth with hands. If anyone ever cuts them down, the village will be washed away (Agarwal, Nita, 2013). Words of her mother left a great effect in her mind. She decided to protect trees and she did it throughout her life. At her later age she led the Chipko movement for environment protection. She was married at a young age, but, became a widow at the age of 22. At 66 years Gaura Devi expired in July 1991. In 1987, the Chipko movement won the prestigious 'Right Livelihood Award' for its successful initiative for environment protection.

Great initiative of Medha Patker for organising the 'Narmada Bachao Andolan':

The 'Save Narmada River' protest was the most extensive movement in the last quarter of the 20th century in India against the Narmada river Valley Project (Reddy, Ratna V, 1998), which is popularised as 'Narmada Bachao Andolan'. The most influential mass movement started in 1985, against the construction of the vast dam over 'Narmada', India's largest westward flowing river.

After independence the Government of India (GOI) carried out an investigation to assess mechanism for using water from the Narmada River by different states through which the river flows, i.e. Gujrat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The GOI also formed Narmada Water Disputes Tribunal to mitigate inter-state disputes in sharing of water, on 6 October 1969. The tribunal investigated the matter and submitted the report after 10 years. The report was released on 12 December 1979. The tribunal approved construction of 30 major, 135 medium, and 3000 small dams over Narmada River including the highest Sardar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat. It was expected that after completion of this project water can be provided to 40 million people; irrigation and electricity would also be provided in the area. Accordingly, construction began.

Medha Patkar alongwith some associates visited the project site in 1985 and found that the construction work of the project was stopped by an order of Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, due to non-fulfilment of essential environmental conditions (Fisher, William, 1995). Without consultation with the people, who were going to be affected, assessment for compensation and rehabilitation were done. Medha Patkar sought clarification from the Ministry of Environment regarding this issue. After numerous survey studies, Medha Patkar and her group realized that the post-project problems were ignored; compensation for Dam-affected people was calculated only for immediate relief, not for permanent settlement of the displaced people.

Medha Patkar was born in 1954 in Bombay, India. Her father, Vasant Khanolkar, was a freedom fighter and lawyer. Her mother, Indu-ji, was a social worker. She completed

her master's degree in Social Work with specialization in community organization and development. Medha Patkar was pursuing her Ph. D. in Tata Institute of Social Studies. However, witnessing the injustice caused to the innocent people living in the Narmada Valley during her visit to the project site, she quit her Ph. D. study and formed and remained engaged with the Narmada Bachao Andolan.

She organized a solidarity march from Madhya Pradesh to the Sardar Sarovar Dam site at Gujrat by foot, through the Narmada valley, which took 36-days (Mehta, Mona G. 12 October 2010). She opined that the march signified the long course of struggle (Fisher, William, 1995). The march was resisted by the police by beating, arresting the marchers and even tearing off clothes of women activists (Fisher, William, 1995). But, the protesters continued protest activity to stop the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam.

Alongwith other protest activities, she undertook hunger strike several times, among which, the longest hunger strike was a 26-day long one (Leslie Jacques, 2006). Patkar-led movement had forced the World Bank to constitute 'Morse Commission' for reviewing the project (Yurchak, Kathleen D. & Rosencranz, Armin, 1996). The Commission reported that the environment and resettlement (of displaced people) policy of the World Bank was being violated by the project (Clark, Dana 2002). The World Bank's financial involvement in the project was cancelled in 1993 (Caufield, Catherine, 1996) by the Indian Government (Kumar, Sanjay & Miller, Susan Katz, 10th April 1993). Again, Medha Patkar undertook hunger strike in 1993 to resist mass departure from the dam construction site. Some political party workers attacked the office of 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' in 1994, and protesters were physically assaulted. She began fasting again with a few associates against the attack. After 20 days of fasting Medha Patkar and her associates were arrested and forcibly fed intravenously (Rowell, Andrew, 1996).

The court gave verdict to stop the construction work of the Dam immediately and directed all concerned states for quick completion of the rehabilitation process (Kumar, Sanjay & Miller, Susan Katz, 10 April 1993). After several years, considering the benefits derived from the Narmada Project for a large number of people, the Court allowed resumption of construction of the project, with a condition of equal progress in resettlement of displaced people in each state party with the rising height of the Dam. The construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam started again in 1999 and was finished in 2006. Finally, the dam was inaugurated in 2017.

The 'Narmada Bachao Andolan' had addressed multiple issues like, resettlement provisions of the displaced; environmental impact, forceful ouster and violations of civil rights and liberties etc. (Nepal, Padam 2009). The activists of the movement applied various

non-violent techniques of protest like, solidarity march, 'Satyagraha', demonstrations and rallies, hunger strikes and blockade of projects etc.

Medha Patkar organised community social action and involved the mass people living in the Narmada Valley and beyond. By bringing together hundreds of local groups and organizations, Medha Patkar established and spearheaded one of the largest non-violent social movements, both nationally and internationally of 'Narmada Bachao Andolan'. She also led to create a coalition of more than 150 mass movements into the 'National Alliance of People's Movements'. Medha Patkar's successful non-violent campaign to save Narmada River and to protect human rights continued for a period of three decades.

Medha Patkar has received a number of prestigious awards: she received the 'Right Livelihood Award' (Laureates, 1991) in 1991; the Goldman Environmental Prize in 1993; Green Ribbon Award of BBC; and the Human Rights Defender's Award from Amnesty International alongwith several other awards. Medha Patkar is an exceptional global citizen. Her courage, sincerity, veracity, and selfless sacrifice inspired the people of the Narmada Valley to fight against the curse of displacement and ecological destruction brought about by the construction of Sardar Sarobar Dam and other several dams over the Narmada River.

Contribution of Sugathakumari in Silent valley Movement:

The 'Silent Valley' is a moist evergreen forest under Palakkad district in Kerala. Kunthipuzha river flows 15 km southwest from the 'Silent Valley'. As there was no noise of cicadas after dark the valley was named as 'Silent valley' by an Englishman.

The Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) proposed a hydroelectric dam across the Kunthipuzha River in 1970. But, the proposed project was not viable in respect of environment protection, as it would threaten a large area of rainforest and the life of rudimentary species of flora and fauna (Nepal, Padam 2009). The proposed dam might destroy 8.3 square km of virgin rainforest by flood. The project plan was expected to generate 240 megawatt of power, to irrigate 10000 ha additional agricultural land and to give employment to 2000-3000 people. The Planning Commission of India approved this project in 1973. But, implementation was delayed for want of necessary fund flow.

In 1976, M.K Prasad inscribed an article in Kerala Sasthra Sahitya Parishad, about the devastating consequence of the proposed hydro-electric project in the 'Silent Valley'. His article created awareness among people. Many eminent personalities appealed to the central government to disapprove the project. In the same year, a task-force was constituted to review the proposed project. Zafar Futehally was appointed as chairman. This task Force recommended, either abandon the project, or adopt several safeguards before implementation. The Kerala government decided to continue the project work by adopting

recommended safeguards. The central government approved the proposal. A movement was started in 1978 to stop the project. A Public interest litigation case was filed in the Kerala High Court in the year 1979. The 'Kerala Prakriti Samrakshana Samiti' and 'Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad' initiated protest meetings, rallies and awareness campaigns all over the state, and their protest activities became a mass movement. The 'Silent Valley movement' claimed that the benefits of the project would be going to Trivandrum against the disruption of local environment (Karan, P. P. 1994, p. 39).

As a result, a Central Committee was constituted headed by M.S. Swaminathan to re-investigate the issue. In an appeal to the Governor, construction work was stopped again. But, the protest activities continued. The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi again constituted a Committee headed by M.G.K. Menon in 1983, to re-examine the project. The Menon Committee recommended to stop the project. As a result the hydro-electric project was closed and the 'Silent Valley' was declared as a National Park in the year 1985.

Famous poet and environment campaigner Sugathakumari played a significant role in the 'Silent Valley' movement. Sugathakumari was born on 22 January 1934 in Aranmula, Kerala. Her father Keshava Pillai, was a freedom fighter and eminent writer. Her mother V. K. Karthiyayini was an eminent teacher. Sugathakumari was Founder Secretary of the 'Kerala Prakriti Samrakshana Samithi', who strongly participated in the 'Save Silent Valley' protest. She had dedicated many of her writings to Mother Nature. A song written by Sugathakumari titled "Marathinu Stuthi" became popular and turned into a symbol of protest against ecological destruction. The song had been sung as the opening prayer in most of "Save the Silent Valley" campaigns (Mohan, Sridevi, 24 April 2004). 'Padma Sree' award winner Sugathakumari won several literary and other prestigious awards (Paul, Cithara, 20 December 2020) for her extra ordinary services. She received the first Indira Priyadarshini Vriksha Mitra Award for her efforts in environmental protection and afforestation. Renowned personality Sugathakumari breathed her last on 23 December 2020.

Results:

The main objectives of these movements were to prevent deforestation, to preserve ecological diversity and above all to protect human rights, so as to protect human species. With the sacrifices of women vanguards in India, mass awareness regarding significance of environment protection and nourishment of nature was developed. Several legislations have been formulated for protection of environment forbidding harm to trees, animals and Mother Nature in India. Another aspect of development i.e. protection of human rights has been unfolded with these protest movements. The government development policies as well as the forest policies have been diverted from anti-human rights approach to humane approach.

These movements forced the government to go for environment friendly and less destructive projects.

The 'Chipko' and 'Silent Valley' movements have made people alert regarding value of forest preservation, and importance of sustaining ecological balance. These movements have made people aware about the significance of forest conservation, which has been the most essential source of survival for large number of people living in rural India.

The environmental movements of India removed many socio-cultural barriers and united people of different castes, economic class, social community, political belief and professional variety, sex and age in a common platform for the noble cause of environment protection.

Women are considered as the weaker section in Indian society after the Vedic period. But, it is evident that in major environmental movements, women took the lead, as the organizer and also as participants. Unlike other social movements, Indian environmental movements have given women a platform to realise public authority, which were earlier controlled by their male counterparts. These movements also established the resurgence of woman power and their concern for the mother earth and ecology (Weber, 1988, pp. 12-13). Women, often marginalised and most affected in any negative development trend, had shown an enormous capability to become 'their own leaders, their own decision-makers, their own sources of strength (Mies and Shiva, 1993, p.246).

In almost all the environmental movements, the leaders' as well common activists had adopted 'Satyagraha' - the Gandhian way of protest, which is considered as one of the most powerful weapons of conflict resolution. The non-violent means of protest have inspired many people fighting a similar battle.

Through formation and leading the Narmada Bachao Andolan, Medha Patkar created awareness of environmental and developmental dilemmas, improved the government accountability, and instigated policy modifications.

Conclusion

To conclude, environmental and ecological movements have grown in popularity in India since the 1970s. These movements were primarily initiated by the affected village people and gradually spread among urban populations of different social categories, different professional and intellectuals.

Major issues of these movements included protecting people's rights to natural assets; to save natural resources; to control environment pollution; to keep biological equilibrium; to rehabilitate displaced people; to uphold human rights and civil liberty among people affected by development projects; and above all to protect 'Mother Nature' from destruction in the name of development.

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