

Ecofeminism and Environmentalism in India: A Critique

Dr Niraj Kumar Singh, Associate Professor of History, Maharaja Agrasen College
(University of Delhi)

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Abstract:

Since the dawn of humanity, people have relied on nature and its resources for various necessities such as food, shelter, and minerals. Unfortunately, there has been a history of excessive exploitation and the unbridled application of science and technology to meet human demands. Recently, parallels have been drawn between the exploitation and suffering experienced by both nature and women, prompting many to advocate for their protection and proper care. Ecofeminism and feminist environmentalism have critically analyzed the complex connections between gender inequality, environmental decline, and social justice. These frameworks challenge traditional notions of power and call for more fair, sustainable, and balanced relationships among humans, nature, and one another. However, ecofeminism tends to attribute the dominance of women and nature mainly to ideology, overlooking the interconnected material sources of dominance rooted in economic advantage and political power. Figures like Dr. Vandana Shiva have made significant contributions by shedding light on the plight of both nature and women, particularly through her work 'Staying Alive.' Conversely, scholars like Bina Aggarwal have underscored the intricate interplay of caste, class, economy, and gender relations in determining women's status beyond just their roles in nurturing and caregiving. Women have actively participated in numerous socio-economic, cultural, and environmental movements, with the Chipko movement in the Garhwal Himalayas serving as a recent exemplar. Chipko, along with various other movements, has demonstrated the genuine influence of women and their deep concerns about nature, as well as other social and economic issues.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Feminist environmentalism, Chipko movement, Big dams, Developmental discourse

Introduction

Ecofeminism and feminist environmentalism are theoretical frameworks that integrate feminist viewpoints with ecological issues, emphasizing the interrelationships among gender, ecology, and social equity. Ecofeminism posits that the subjugation of both women and the environment originates from a shared source: patriarchal systems that prioritize dominance and control. By drawing parallels between the oppression of women and the deterioration of the environment, ecofeminism aims to question and reshape these interconnected power structures. It calls for a transition from hierarchical and exploitative relationships to more balanced and enduring ways of existence, valuing diversity in all its manifestations – be they biological, cultural, or gender-related. In contrast, feminist environmentalism concentrates on examining how environmental problems disproportionately impact women and marginalized communities due to social disparities. It highlights how women frequently bear the brunt of environmental decline while being excluded from decision-making processes regarding natural resource management and conservation. Feminist environmentalism advocates for acknowledging the inherent worth of nature and championing environmental policies that prioritize social justice and gender parity. Both ecofeminism and feminist environmentalism underscore the necessity for a comprehensive and interconnected approach to addressing ecological and gender-related dilemmas. Their objectives encompass increasing awareness about the connections between gender and environmental issues, pushing for more inclusive environmental policies, promoting sustainable practices that honor nature's limits, and empowering women to actively engage in environmental decision-making. Consequently, ecofeminism and feminist environmentalism provide crucial perspectives for examining and tackling the intricate links between gender inequity, environmental decline, and social fairness. These frameworks challenge conventional notions of power and advocate for more just, sustainable, and harmonious relationships among humans, nature, and each other.

Ecofeminism: Emergence

Since the dawn of human civilization, our society has relied heavily on nature and its resources for various needs, ranging from sustenance like food and fodder to essential materials like fuel. As agriculture and settlements emerged, along with growing populations and the establishment of states, the demand for natural resources surged. Extensive land clearing became necessary to meet settlement-related requirements such as crop cultivation, timber for household purposes, and fodder for animals. The formation of states and persistent conflicts only intensified this demand, placing significant strain on both natural resources and the environment at large. This led to the ruthless exploitation of resources, regardless of the detrimental effects on the ecology and environment. Modern ecological crises like global warming, climate change, ozone layer depletion, land degradation, and others have resulted in shifts in

lifestyle, large-scale displacements and migrations, health risks, resource depletion, and more. In essence, life in today's environment has become challenging, and we must approach existing ecological crises with great care.

Women have played a central role in the evolutionary process, alongside nature, from giving birth and nurturing to influencing the course of the future and beyond. Many socio-cultural and economic movements have been either led or heavily influenced by women. Examples include the Chipko movement in India, movements against militarism and hazardous waste dumping in the US and Europe, and the Green Belt movement in Kenya. These movements are seen as being dominated by women and feminist perspectives, demonstrating the interconnection between the domination of individuals and nature through factors like sex, race, and class.

The term "ecofeminism" was coined by Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 and gained traction in the West amidst peace, ecological, and feminist movements in the 1970s and 1980s. Ynestra King further elaborated on this concept in 1976, and it eventually evolved into a fully-fledged area of study in the 1980s. The first conference on ecofeminism in 1980 at Amherst, Massachusetts, titled 'Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s,' explored the connections between feminism, militarism, health, and ecology. According to Ynestra, ecofeminism addresses the devastation of the Earth and its beings by corporate and military interests as feminist concerns. It recognizes the same mentality that seeks to control women's bodies and sexuality, relying on multiple systems of dominance and state power to achieve its ends.

Ecofeminist thought drew parallels between a society dominated by patriarchy, violence against women, and the destruction of nature in various forms, including the depletion of natural resources and greenery and the abuse of chemicals and technology. Ecofeminist thinkers aimed to challenge the stereotype that women and nature were perceived as disorganized and irrational, needing regulation and control. On the contrary, men were often seen as rational and capable of leading nature's development. It's increasingly recognized that unless these myths are challenged, the well-being of women and nature cannot be ensured.

Prominent ecofeminist figures like Susan Griffin, Mary Daly, Carolyn Merchant, Ynestra Young, Ariel Kay Salleh, Karen Warren, and others have emphasized the interconnected oppression of nature and women. They argue that feminist issues can be understood in terms of environmental concerns. However, ecofeminism varies across different contexts and is influenced by factors like class, caste, religion, and more. Therefore, a linear understanding of ecofeminism is challenging, and there are various types of ecofeminism akin to different feminist perspectives. To truly grasp ecofeminism, it's crucial to comprehend the connections between the oppression of women and nature. Feminist theory must also incorporate an ecological perspective and vice versa.

In summary, ecofeminism can be viewed as a narrative about the position of women in a predominantly patriarchal and exploitative society, akin to the anthropocentric approach of humans toward nature. It's an awareness that acknowledges the intimate link between the exploitation of nature and Western Man's attitude toward women and tribal cultures. The patriarchal conceptual framework elevates attributes associated with masculinity over those linked with femininity, resulting in hierarchical dualisms. This logic of domination, along with value-based hierarchical thinking, justifies the simultaneous dominance of women and nature. Recognizing and respecting the interdependence of all life forms is imperative, as any harm inflicted on nature ultimately affects human lives, including those of women.

Ecofeminism: Perspectives

Ecofeminist theories, as described by Carolyn Merchant in 1992, encompass a range of perspectives, including liberal, radical, and socialist orientations. The feminist movement of the 1960s primarily focused on advocating for women's participation in the workforce and did not deeply explore the interconnectedness of the oppression of nature and women. During this same period, Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" (1962) drew attention to the harmful effects of pollution and the use of chemical pesticides on both human and non-human ecosystems, underscoring the broader concern of life on Earth as a collective issue.

Liberal ecofeminists directed their attention toward the rapid depletion of natural resources and the absence of effective regulatory measures to mitigate the impacts of chemicals, pesticides, and other environmental contaminants. They argued that the unregulated exploitation of natural resources led to environmental problems that varied in scope and duration. They advocated for socially responsible production practices that aligned with environmental sustainability. This approach necessitated a scientific foundation supported by appropriate laws and conservation strategies. The belief was that providing equal opportunities for women would encourage their participation as scientists, conservationists, and legal experts, thereby influencing human interactions with nature positively.

However, this viewpoint fell short of addressing the fundamental issue: the prevailing development model that caused significant harm to the environment beyond the enactment of environmental legislation. In an earlier discussion, Merchant (1990, p. 93) contended that critiquing the patriarchal model offered a path toward improving the status of both women and nature. This perspective emphasized nurturing the relationship between women and nature, drawing on concepts like the mother Goddess, the female reproductive system, and animals. Over time, these ideas had been overshadowed by the emergence of male deities, diminishing the status of female gods. The discourse surrounding nature was further devalued with the onset of the Scientific Revolution in the 17th century, which placed excessive emphasis on man's dominance over technology, science, and industry (Merchant 1992, p. 191).

This shift undermined the longstanding notion of women's closeness to nature through their capacity for childbirth and contributions to progeny, a perspective that deserved recognition and celebration.

Ecofeminism: Critique

The ecofeminist viewpoint has faced criticism from various feminist scholars like Cecile Jackson (1993), Janet Biehl (1991), Meera Nanda (1991), and Bina Agarwal (1992). They argue that this perspective is seen as "ethnocentric, essentialist, blind to class, ethnicity and other differentiating cleavages, ahistorical and neglects the material sphere" (Jackson 1993, p. 398). The primary argument of ecofeminism centers on the historical exploitation of nature and women, asserting that both have suffered due to development, and any harm to nature also impacts women. This explanation places the dominance of women and nature primarily in ideology, overlooking the "interrelated material sources of dominance based on economic advantage and political power" (Agarwal 1992, p. 122), as well as the division of labor and opportunities based on gender. Biehl (1991, p. 15) contends that such patriarchal stereotypes pigeonhole women as solely nurturing beings, restricting the recognition of the full spectrum of women's potential and abilities. Additionally, "the use of metaphors of women as 'nurturing – like the earth and of the earth as female abound are regressive rather than liberating women" (Biehl 1991, p. 17-19). This perspective fails to acknowledge that nature, culture, and gender are "historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and time periods" (Agarwal 1992, p. 123), thus portraying women as a uniform category, which "fails to differentiate among women by class, race, ethnicity and so on" (Agarwal 1992, p. 122).

Over time, society has evolved in its nature and character. However, ecofeminists, as argued by Susan Prentice (1998), tend to assert that men are inherently harmful to nature, disregarding the fact that men also care for nature and hold ethical values in this regard. The dominant mode of development, capitalism, has had a significant impact on nature. This reality is somewhat downplayed, and a polarized narrative of men versus women is promoted, limiting effective strategies for change. Ecofeminists with a socialist perspective, on the other hand, perceive nature and humans as "socially constructed, rooted in an analysis of race, class and gender" (Merchant 1992, p. 194). They have put forth a critique of capitalist dominance in terms of patriarchal relationships and the relationship between production, reproduction, and ecology (Merchant 1992, pp. 195-197).

The arrival of colonial forces, along with capitalism and its development model, disrupted the traditional way of life in the Indian subcontinent. While the capitalist economy was dominated by men who led the production process, women were gradually confined to domestic roles and the reproduction of the workforce. This also affected the sustainability of nature. The socialist model, in contrast, advocated

for the protection of nature, which was central to reproduction. Ecofeminists found appeal in this model as it promised the safeguarding of the environment and recognized women, who considered themselves closely connected to nature, as marginalized. However, this generalized view tended to overlook distinctions based on caste, class, race, ethnicity, and so forth. Nonetheless, it succeeded in establishing a connection between gender and the environment.

Ecofeminism: The Indian Context

The ecofeminist movement in India, led by Dr. Vandana Shiva, has long criticized the prevailing development model and its impact on the environment. Shiva, in her work from 1988, initially linked modern science and technology to being Western, patriarchal, and colonial in nature, resulting in harm to both women and nature. This perspective led to a shift away from traditional development systems, distancing from nature, which symbolizes all forms of life and creativity. This shift has resulted in the marginalization and displacement of both nature and human beings, particularly women, who are often associated with nature as creators of life. Their understanding of nature and means of survival have consequently been pushed to the background.

Nevertheless, Dr. Shiva also views women, particularly those from the Third World, as catalysts for change, as exemplified by the Chipko movement in the Garhwal Himalayas during the 1970s. She, along with Maria Mies, contends that women, when involved in movements against ecological harm, nuclear threats, and similar issues, are "conscious of the connections between patriarchal violence against women, other people, and nature" (Mies, 1993, p. 14). They further argue that these movements adhere to ecofeminist principles such as interconnectedness, wholeness, interdependence, and spirituality, which stand in opposition to capitalistic and patriarchal norms. They advocate that the ecofeminist perspective on subsistence is grounded in the practical aspects of subsistence production worldwide, and safeguarding this base would ultimately lead to women's liberation and the preservation of life on Earth.

However, these arguments are not without their inconsistencies and overgeneralizations, as evident in Dr. Shiva's work, particularly in "Staying Alive" (1988), where the study of rural women in North-west India is assumed to represent all Third World women. Critics of Dr. Shiva also challenge the assumption that society is democratically organized and that people possess sufficient land to sustain themselves (Gabriel Dietrich, 1990, 1992). They argue that the argument overlooks the realities of caste hierarchies, subordination, patriarchy, and violence within traditional tribal and peasant communities. Another critique comes from Meera Nanda (1991), who points out the populist nature of Shiva's argument, where the West is depicted as malevolent and the Third World as virtuous. Accordingly, modern science is equated with masculinity and thus seen as destructive. Moreover, Shiva downplays

pre-existing power imbalances, property relations, caste structures, and other forms of inequality that existed in pre-colonial times.

Changing Times: Feminist Environmentalism

Agarwal (1992) argues that feminist environmentalism views the relationship between women and nature as shaped by factors like gender, class, production processes, and social and historical contexts. This has led to a widening class-gender divide, exacerbated by the state and individuals' increased control over natural resources and the decline of communal land and property. Aggarwal (1992) further emphasizes that the lack of community interest in managing shared resources, combined with agricultural mechanization and the erosion of local knowledge, has gendered and class-based implications for environmental degradation.

The modern development model has also marginalized women's traditional knowledge gained through their close interaction with nature and its resources. The environmental movement in India has evolved over time, with scholars like Krishna (1996), Ramchandra Guha (1988), and Guha and Gadgil (1995) highlighting the failures of the developmental model, leading to various environmental crises and social conflicts.

Pre-existing conflicts over resource control within communities and with rulers existed even before British colonial rule. The colonial administration further exacerbated this by exerting control over forests and other natural resources, curtailing existing rights. Post-independence India saw various environmental movements that cut across caste, class, and gender lines, centering on the livelihoods of indigenous populations. The rapid pace of development since the 1970s has brought communities into conflict with the government.

The Chipko movement in the Garhwal Himalayas during the 1970s was one of the earliest environmental movements in independent India. It emerged as a protest against large-scale deforestation by commercial timber operators, directly clashing with local communities' refusal to relinquish forest resources. Women played a significant role in this community-led movement, using Gandhian techniques. Several other movements in tribal areas across India have focused on controlling depleting natural resources and safeguarding the livelihoods of forest-dwelling communities.

Post-independence, the initial construction of large dams did not face much opposition, as they were seen as contributing to nation-building. However, issues arose during rehabilitation efforts, leading to displacement and hardship for affected communities. Women have been active participants in various political, social, and environmental movements, advocating for issues like gender equality, women's rights, and socio-economic empowerment. They've also been at the forefront of peasant and tribal movements.

Conclusion

The Stockholm Conference on Environment and Development in 1973 marked a turning point in the inclusion of environmental and ecological concerns in the developmental discourse. While women have played significant roles in these movements, they are not exclusively seen as women's movements. Environmental concerns have often been outside the scope of the women's movement in India, which has primarily focused on urban issues. An analysis of protest movements reveals their deep connections to caste, class, and gender issues. Women's participation in these movements must be understood within the context of these material realities. The adverse effects of environmental degradation on women can lead to the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable livelihood strategies, which are crucial for societal progress. Resistance movements at the grassroots level highlight the growing divide between the rich and poor in terms of property and power, intricately linked to caste, class, and gender dynamics. Women taking up environmental issues can broaden the scope of the women's movement, potentially leading to significant changes in development, resource allocation, and societal structures. An integrated approach is needed to understand the interplay between gender and environmental issues and to foster harmony between humans and the environment.

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