

Practical Implications of Indian Women's Roles in Environmental Movements, Their Impact on Policymaking, and Contributions to the Theoretical Development of Ecofeminism in Literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the practical roles played by Indian women in environmental movements and examines their significant impact on policy-making and eco-critical discourse. Through case studies such as the Save the Forest Movement in Jharkhand and the Anti Coca-Cola struggle in Kerala led by Mayilamma, the paper highlights how grassroots activism by women has contributed not only to environmental conservation but also to the theoretical development of ecofeminism in Indian literature. It argues that these movements reflect a deep connection between women and nature, challenging dominant patriarchal and capitalist structures. The paper also discusses how these real-life interventions have influenced literary representations and expanded the scope of ecofeminist thought in India. The analysis extends to the influence of these movements on Indian ecofeminist literature, showing how lived experiences have shaped theoretical frameworks. The study also explores practical implications of the selected movements through policy recommendations advocating for inclusive decision-making, community-led conservation models such as that of the Bishnoi, and the necessity of addressing the gendered dimensions of environmental protest. The paper concludes that the integration of women's voices and indigenous knowledge is essential for achieving sustainable and equitable environmental policy and practice in India.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Indian women, Environmental movements, Mayilamma, Policymaking

INTRODUCTION

Indian environmental history is inextricably linked to women's leadership in movements that redefine humanity's relationship with nature. The Chipko Movement, immortalized by Gaura Devi's iconic stand against loggers in Reni village, exemplifies how women's direct dependence on forest resources catalyzed innovative conservation strategies. Similarly, Mayilamma's fight against Coca-Cola's groundwater extraction in Kerala illustrates how corporate exploitation disproportionately impacts women tasked with securing water and fuel. While geographically and culturally distinct, these movements share a common thread: they position women not merely as victims of ecological degradation but as architects of sustainable alternatives. This paper contends that such activism constitutes a form of embodied ecofeminism—a theory-praxis nexus where women's daily interactions with nature inform both on-the-ground resistance and literary discourse. By examining historical records, policy documents, and ecofeminist literature, the analysis reveals how these movements challenged the Indian Forest Act of 1927, influenced the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, and inspired literary works that reconceptualize nature-women relationships in postcolonial India. The study further investigates how tribal and rural women's knowledge systems, often dismissed as "folk wisdom," provided viable frameworks for balancing ecological and human needs—a contrast to top-down conservation models.

ROLES IN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS

Tribal Women and Grassroots Activism

Indian women, particularly from tribal and rural communities, have been at the forefront of environmental movements. Their deep connection with nature, often rooted in indigenous knowledge systems, has enabled them to lead movements against environmental degradation. For instance, the Chipko Movement, led by women like Gaura Devi, exemplifies how local communities, especially women, have protected forests from logging (M & Hans, 2024; Tyagi, 2020). The forests of Uttarakhand and the villages of Jharkhand bear witness to a revolutionary truth: Indian women have redefined environmental conservation through movements that intertwine ecological preservation with social justice. From Gaura Devi's defiant embrace of trees in the Chipko protests of 1974 to Mayilamma's decade-long resistance against corporate water exploitation in Plachimada, women have spearheaded movements that transcend mere environmentalism, embedding themselves in the fabric of ecofeminist theory and policy reform. These grassroots campaigns, often emerging from the daily struggles of rural and tribal communities, reveal a profound symbiosis between women's lived experiences and ecological stewardship. By analysing these movements through the dual lenses of environmental activism and literary ecofeminism, this paper argues that Indian women have not only protected ecosystems but also dismantled patriarchal and capitalist frameworks that subordinate both nature and marginalized genders. Their activism, rooted in traditional ecological knowledge and amplified through collective resistance, has reshaped national forest policies, inspired literary narratives, and expanded the global understanding of intersectional environmental justice.

Case Studies: Mayilamma and Her Struggle Against Ecological Degradation In The State of Kerala

The interplay between environmental degradation, corporate exploitation, and indigenous resistance in India has produced two landmark movements: Mayilamma's struggle against Coca-Cola in Plachimada, Kerala, and the Jharkhand Save the Forest Movement (JJBA). For the purpose of this research, we will look at the case of Mayilamma. The Coca-Cola plant in Plachimada, operational from 2000 to 2004, extracted nearly 1.5 million litres of groundwater daily, exacerbating drought conditions in a region already vulnerable to water scarcity. Mayilamma, an Eravallar tribal woman, witnessed firsthand the contamination of local wells and the surge in health issues like skin diseases and gastrointestinal disorders among children. Her transformation from a daily wage labourer to the leader of the Anti-Coca-Cola Struggle Committee (Coca-Cola Virudha Samara Samiti) reflects the grassroots nature of the movement. The protests, which included satyagraha (nonviolent resistance) and road blockades, gained momentum when women from Plachimada's Mahila Mangal Dal (Women's Welfare Group) staged sit-ins at the plant's gates. By 2004, the Kerala High Court ruled that groundwater is a public trust, forcing Coca-Cola to cease operations—a precedent later cited in global water rights litigation.

Mayilamma's leadership exemplifies what scholars term as "subaltern environmentalism," where marginalized groups link ecological survival to social justice. Her activism was deeply gendered: women constituted 70% of the Plachimada protesters, as water scarcity directly affected their domestic and agricultural roles. These movements exemplify how marginalized communities, particularly indigenous women, mobilize against ecological and socio-economic injustices, and, demonstrating how tribal women's struggles against environmental exploitation intersect with issues of caste, class, and gender, emphasizing the need for an intersectional approach to ecofeminism (Justin & Menon, 2022) (Justin & Menon, n.d.). Mayilamma's leadership in shutting down a Coca-Cola plant responsible for groundwater depletion and pollution underscores the intersection of environmentalism and subaltern activism. Meanwhile, the JJBA's decades-long campaign to reclaim forest rights from state and corporate control highlights the resilience of Adivasi communities in Jharkhand. Both movements challenge dominant narratives of development by centring traditional ecological knowledge, community governance, and gendered resistance. It has been contended by many scholars that the role of women in addressing the biodiversity-climate nexus has been crucial. Their involvement in grassroots movements and community-led initiatives has promoted equitable environmental policies, integrating ecofeminist principles into governance (Mahamuni, 2024).

IMPACT ON POLICYMAKING

Influence on Environmental Policies

Women's participation in environmental movements has influenced policymaking, particularly in the integration of gendered perspectives into environmental governance. For example, the Chipko Movement led to policy changes in forest management, recognizing the role of local communities, especially women, in conservation efforts (M & Hans, 2024; Sumi & Chandrasekar, 2023). The Plachimada struggle influenced landmark judgments, including the 2010 Kerala Groundwater (Control and Regulation) Act, which prohibits industrial extraction in water-stressed regions. The movement also inspired the 2016 Criminal Case against Coca-Cola, which accused the company of "wilful pollution" under Section 277 of the Indian Penal Code. However, the Plachimada Compensation Tribunal, established in 2011 to adjudicate ₹3.6 billion (\$48 million) in damages, has yet to disburse funds—a reminder of the state's ambivalence toward corporate accountability. (Koonan, 2021)

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ECOFEMINISM

Ecofeminist Principles and Practices

Ecofeminism in India has been shaped by the interconnectedness of ecological and feminist perspectives. The movement critiques patriarchal structures that exploit both women and nature, advocating for the liberation of both. This is evident in the works of Vandana Shiva and other scholars who highlight the holistic perspective on health and sustainability (Alice et al., 2024; Anjum, 2020). The movements underscore the intersectionality of environmental justice, where Adivasi and Dalit women's identities as marginalized communities shape their ecological activism. Mayilamma's leadership in Plachimada highlighted how corporate water privatization disproportionately impacts women tasked with domestic and agricultural water management. Similarly, JJBA's Adivasi women linked deforestation to the erosion of cultural and economic autonomy, framing their resistance as a fight for both ecological and social survival. These cases critique mainstream ecofeminist narratives—often centred on urban, upper-caste perspectives—by prioritizing subaltern voices and demonstrating how caste and indigeneity intersect with gender in environmental struggles. The theoretical development of ecofeminism in India has been enriched by intersectional approaches, recognizing the interplay of caste, class, and gender in environmental struggles. This approach has been critical in understanding the diverse experiences of women in environmental movements (Justin & Menon, 2022) (Justin & Menon, n.d.). The movements provide a theoretical counterpoint to neoliberal models of resource extraction. Mayilamma's protest against Coca-Cola's groundwater exploitation challenged the corporate commodification of natural resources, framing it as a "masculinist imposition" of capitalist enterprise on indigenous land. JJBA's opposition to colonial-era forest laws and mining projects similarly rejected state-sanctioned industrialization, advocating instead for community-led stewardship rooted in traditional ecological knowledge. These critiques align with ecofeminist arguments that equate environmental degradation with patriarchal and capitalist exploitation. By centring Adivasi and Dalit women's traditional knowledge, these movements also redefine sustainability as a practice of intersectional resilience. For instance, JJBA's forest mapping and NTFP (non-timber forest product) trade networks demonstrate how indigenous systems can achieve ecological regeneration while ensuring economic autonomy. Mayilamma's use of folk songs and symbolic protests (e.g., dubbing Coca-Cola "Kalpanakka" or "Demoness") revitalized cultural narratives to critique environmental harm. These approaches challenge top-down sustainability models, advocating instead for localized, gender-inclusive solutions.

Influence on Literature

Several Indian writers and activists have been directly influenced by grassroots environmental movements like those led by Mayilamma in Plachimada and the Save the Forest Movement in Jharkhand. A notable writer is Jothibai Pariyadath. She authored *Mayilamma: Oru Jeevitha* (Mayilamma: A Life), which chronicles the life and activism of Mayilamma, transforming her personal narrative into a broader symbol of subaltern environmental resistance. Pariyadath's work not only documents the Plachimada struggle but also serves as a literary intervention that amplifies the voices of marginalized women in environmental movements, embodying the ethos of ecofeminism and subaltern activism. Another prominent Malayalam poet and activist, Sugathakumari played a leading role in the Save Silent Valley Movement and has consistently written about women's roles in environmental struggles. Her poetry and essays reflect the influence of grassroots protests and have contributed to shaping the discourse of ecofeminism and environmental justice in India. Other influential figures include Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, and Arundhati Roy, whose writings and activism have been shaped by, and have helped shape, the trajectory of Indian environmental movements, though their work is more broadly situated within the national and global context of ecofeminism and

environmental justice. These authors and activists use literature, biography, and public advocacy to connect the lived realities of grassroots women's environmental activism to broader theoretical and policy debates, ensuring that the lessons and voices of these movements continue to influence Indian ecofeminist thought and practice.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Inclusive Decision-Making Processes

The growing body of research and grassroots experience demonstrates that the inclusion of women in environmental decision-making is not only a matter of equity but also leads to more effective, context-sensitive policies. Women bring unique perspectives shaped by their daily interactions with natural resources and their roles as primary caregivers and resource managers in many communities. Despite their significant contributions, women remain underrepresented in high-level policy groups and environmental governance structures. To address this gap, it is essential to institutionalize women's participation at all levels of environmental governance. This can be achieved by appointing women as consultants, advisors, and full members in national and state-level environmental policy committees. The practical implications of women's roles in environmental movements include the need for inclusive decision-making processes. Women should be appointed as consultants or advisors in high-level policy groups to ensure grassroots solutions are integrated into environmental policies (Mago et al., 2022). Mandating gender quotas or targets in environmental agencies and local governance bodies has helped develop sustainable environmental practices to some extent in recent years. Ensuring that policy consultations actively seek and incorporate grassroots women's voices, particularly those from marginalized and indigenous backgrounds, would also help bridge the disconnect between top-down policy frameworks and the lived realities of affected communities, leading to more sustainable and just outcomes. Furthermore, international precedents, such as the integration of gender-specific language in the UNFCCC and the work of organizations like WEDO, underscore the global recognition of this need.

Community-Led Conservation Models: The Bishnoi Example

The Bishnoi community model exemplifies an indigenous approach to environmental protection, emphasizing the role of women in conservation efforts. Researchers in the field have argued that culturally rooted principles can provide effective solutions to global environmental challenges (Mago et al., 2022). Women have historically played central roles, from the legendary sacrifice of Amrita Devi Bishnoi to the ongoing daily stewardship of resources. Bishnoi women are not only leaders in protest but also in the practical management of water, forests, and wildlife, often passing down conservation ethics across generations. Their approach combines religious injunctions, customary law, and collective action, resulting in higher biodiversity and resilience even in arid regions. This example demonstrates that conservation strategies anchored in local culture and led by women can offer scalable solutions to global environmental challenges, especially when supported by enabling policy frameworks.

Addressing Gendered Dimensions of Environmental Protest

The gendered dynamics of environmental protest are evident in movements such as the opposition to hydroelectric dams in the Garhwal Himalaya. While women often form the backbone of such movements, their specific concerns—ranging from daily water access to the preservation of cultural and spiritual practices—are frequently sidelined in both movement leadership and policy responses. Ethnographic research reveals that the lack of gender-sensitive engagement undermines both the effectiveness of environmental campaigns and the justice claims of these movements. Policies must explicitly address the differentiated impacts of environmental degradation and development projects on women. Environmental impact assessments (EIAs) should include gender-disaggregated data and require direct consultations with women in affected communities. Social movement leadership should be encouraged (or required, in the case of NGOs and formal organizations) to ensure women's representation and voice in negotiation and advocacy processes. The gendered dimensions of environmental protest, as seen in movements like the opposition to hydroelectric dams in the Garhwal Himalaya, highlight the need for policies that address women's specific concerns. Women's participation in these movements, though often overlooked, is crucial for effective environmental governance (Drew, 2014).

CONCLUSION

Indian women have played a crucial role in environmental movements, influencing policymaking and contributing to the theoretical development of ecofeminism. Their activism, rooted in indigenous knowledge and intersectional perspectives, has been instrumental in promoting sustainable development and environmental justice. The integration of ecofeminist principles into policymaking and the recognition of women's roles in environmental governance are essential for achieving ecological sustainability and social equity. While policy frameworks increasingly recognize the importance of women's participation, practical implementation remains inconsistent. Tokenistic inclusion—where women are present but not empowered to influence decisions—remains a barrier. Moreover, the intersectionality of gender with caste, class, and indigeneity is often overlooked, leading to the marginalization of the most vulnerable women even within “inclusive” processes. Therefore, policies must go beyond representation to address structural inequalities and empower women with real decision-making authority and resources.

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