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RESEARCH ARTICLE

WOMEN AT THE HELM OF GREEN RESISTANCE: GANDHIAN-ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

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Abstract

Women's courage and moral clarity in the defense of their lands, forests, and water against exploitation have long driven environmental movements. From the tree-hugging defiance of the Chipko movement to contemporary campaigns for climate justice, these struggles carry forward principles of nonviolence, self-reliance, and trusteeship reminiscent of Mahatma Gandhi's vision. But they also reflect ecofeminist insights into the connection between caring for nature and caring for communities and expose how environmental harm often deepens gender inequality. This article explores, through case studies from different regions, their strategies, ethical foundations, and social impacts, and brings out how such movements do not only resist ecological destruction but can also help reimagine development in ways that are just, sustainable, and rooted in local agency. The study underlines the continuing relevance of women's leadership for bringing in a better balance between human beings and nature.

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Introduction:-

The environmental crisis in India today is as much social and ethical as it is ecological: rapid industrial expansion, deforestation, water scarcity, and climate instability reshape the livelihoods of people, especially those in rural areas and from marginalized communities. It is here that women have time and again stood in the forefront: protecting forests, rivers, and farmlands, and defending the rights of their communities to live in harmony with nature.

This is not an accidental leadership. Most of these women draw strength from ethical traditions that reject exploitation and uphold balance-values that strongly resonate with Mahatma Gandhi's vision of nonviolence, or ahimsa, self-reliance, or swaraj, and collective welfare, or sarvodaya. Yet their activism also reflects ecofeminist insights that link the domination of nature with the oppression of women and stress the importance of care, reciprocity, and justice.

From the tree-hugging defiance of the Chipko movement in the 1970s up to today's climate justice campaigns, ecological movements by women in India have combined moral conviction with practical strategies for living

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sustainably. Reading these through a combined Gandhian-ecofeminist lens highlights how such movements resist ecological destruction and offer pathways to reimagine development during a time of unprecedented planetary crisis

Theoretical Framework:-

Gandhian Environmental Ethics:-Development to Mahatma Gandhi was tinged with strong ethical overtones, replete with a high degree of moral responsibility and ecological balance. In his own words, "Developmental activity should not result in isolated islands of prosperity in a sea of poverty; and secondly, the outcome of development should not be at the cost of nature" (Gandhian relevance to environmental sustainability, n.d.). His doctrine of trusteeship is an articulation of this ethos, where regarding wealth as a collective trust rather than individual property, he envisioned non-violent, non-exploitative forms of life respecting ecological limits (Sarvodaya: The Theory of Trusteeship, n.d; Trusteeship Model, 2015).

Ecofeminist Principles:-

Ecofeminism examines how patriarchy degrades both women and nature. It advocates for a paradigm that is grounded on care, reciprocity, and justice. Drawing from the key work of Vandana Shiva, a well-known ecofeminist scholar, Western scientific and technological norms have minimized women's ecological knowledge and reduced nature to a commodity. She contended, along with Maria Mies, that struggles by women against ecological destruction are always linked with their resistance against patriarchal exploitation. (Ecofeminism in India – Vandana Shiva, n.d.)

Intersection: Gandhian Thought and Ecofeminism:-

The meeting of Gandhian ethics and ecofeminism can be clearly seen in the environmental movements in India. For example, the Chipko Movement, during which women protected forests through non-violent tree hugging, fully demonstrated Gandhian non-violence, or satyagraha, and ecofeminist care-based resistance. Again, there is much broader ecological concern: his warnings against industrialization, Swaraj as grassroots sustainability, and the idea that Earth has enough for needs but not for greed-all resonate both with ethical environmental philosophy and ecofeminist perspectives.

Historical Overview of Women-Led Environmental Movements In India:-

The Chipko Movement:-

The Chipko Movement started in the early 1970s in India's Himalayan region as a grassroots campaign against commercial logging. The movement used nonviolent resistance, notably "tree-hugging," in which villagers, especially women, embraced trees to prevent them from being felled. It originated near Mandal village in 1973, when local forest rights were refused and diverted to commercial interests, which forced villagers to physically protect trees (Britannica, 2025).

One such incident that happened in March 1974 is when Gaura Devi led a mobilization of about 27 women from Reni village against loggers. She characterized the forest as "our mother's home," and the women kept vigil guarding the trees for days until loggers retreated. This action led to a 10-year halt in logging activities in the area (Sustainability Shiksha, n.d.; Britannica, 2025).The roots of this movement also are derived from the visionary leaders who, through grassroots networks, organized women in the 1960s under the Uttarakhand Sarvodaya Mandal, doing the preliminary work for Chipko. Chipko thus kindled ecological awareness throughout the country and established a model for ecofeminist and Gandhian environmental action.

Silent Valley Movement:-

The Silent Valley Movement in Kerala during the 1970s-1980s emerged as a point of no return for Indian environmental activism. The hydroelectric project was first mooted in the early 1970s by the KSEB for damming the Kunthipuzha River, thus inundating approximately 8.3 km² of rainforest and threatening the very existence of species such as the lion-tailed macaque (India Mongabay, 2025; Vajiram& Ravi, 2025).

The protest gained momentum under the unrelenting efforts of KSSP and poet-activist Sugathakumari, with support from various scientists like Salim Ali and M. S. Swaminathan-for example, Ali's ornithological warnings and Swaminathan's biosphere recommendations (INFLIBNET e-Books; India Mongabay, 2025). In response, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi commissioned an expert panel led by M. G. K. Menon, which recommended shelving the project. So, in 1983, the plan for this dam was laid to rest, and in 1984, Silent Valley was declared a National Park, which was inaugurated in 1985 (The News Minute, 2018; Vajiram& Ravi, 2025).

Why it matters: The movement ushered in a nationwide awareness of the requirement for environmental impact studies, public hearings, and conservation of biodiversity; it established the precedent for environmental policy in India. (Down To Earth, 2025)

Khejarli Massacre:-

Going further back into history, the Khejarli Massacre in 1730 stands as one of the earliest recorded environmental sacrifices in India. When Maharaja Abhai Singh of Jodhpur ordered the felling of the sacred khejri trees in Khejarli village to build his palace, Amrita Devi Bishnoi—along with her three daughters—hugged the trees in defiance and were killed. Inspired by their sacrifice, 363 Bishnoi community members laid down their lives defending those trees (India Today, 2024).

Thus, the Maharaja withdrew his orders, and the massacre became a seminal event remembered and commemorated as a symbol of environmental martyrdom and devotion. Over the years, it became an inspiration for other movements, such as Chipko, and is still remembered through annual fairs, like the Khejarli Mela, and with the establishment of the Amrita Devi Bishnoi National Award by the Government of India to commend conservation (NDNS; India Today 2024).

Narmada BachaoAndolan (NBA):-

The Narmada BachaoAndolan, beginning in 1985, is one of the most important environmental justice movements in India. Launched to oppose large dam projects, especially the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River, the NBA brought together tribal communities, farmers, and activists under the leadership of Medha Patkar and Baba Amte. The key demands related to the issues were a complete halt to the dam construction, proper rehabilitation of communities displaced, and challenging the prevailing paradigm of development that kept the environmental and human cost of such developmental projects at bay (PolSci Institute, n.d.; Testbook, 2025).

Methods of Resistance:-

- Non-violent demonstrations, known as satyagraha: Sit-ins, events like the "Jal Satyagraha" or water sit-ins, long marches, which included the 1990 "Narmada Jan Vikas Sangharsh Yatra," and also fasting.
- Litigation: NBA filed PILs in the Supreme Court on issues of environmental clearances while pressurising authorities to implement rehabilitation measures.

Media and international advocacy: The media was used to expand its voice; it also appealed to international bodies. During this time, the World Bank commissioned the Morse Commission to study the project. Critical findings from the Commission led the World Bank to pull out funding in 1993 (PolSci Institute, n.d; Essential Thinkers, 2013; Banaotes, 2013).

Achievements and Legacy:-

Right Livelihood Award: This international award was given to NBA in 1991 for its struggle through non-violence to environmental and human rights. The important awardees included Medha Patkar and Baba Amte (Testbook, 2025).

- Policy impact: The NBA catalyzed reforms of displacement and rehabilitation policies, norms on environment assessment, and spurred new standards for inclusive development. That is according to Testbook (2025), PolSci Institute (n.d.), and Banaotes (2013)

Shift in the development discourse: It shifted the debates on development issues and put ecological justice, indigenous rights, and equitable governance on the center stage. (PolSci Institute, n.d.; Essential Thinkers, 2013)

Seed Sovereignty and Sustainable Farming Initiatives:-

The Community Seed Sovereignty of Navdanya:-

Navdanya represents a pioneering, women-centered, farmer-led environmental movement for organic farming, biodiversity, and the conservation of indigenous seeds. Founded by Vandana Shiva, Navdanya has created over 150 community seed banks across 22 Indian states, which conserve upwards of 3,000 local crop varieties (Navdanya, n.d; The Seed Warrior n.d). By enabling farmers—primarily women—to save, exchange, and cultivate their own seeds, Navdanya champions seed sovereignty as a form of ecological, economic, and cultural freedom. In the 2023 Frontline interview, Vandana Shiva insisted on reclaiming land as a commons, with shared rights for all genders, and reiterated that sustainable agriculture can only be achieved through equity and collective management.

Women's Self-Help Group in Karnataka – Organic Millet Farming:-

The Bibi Fatima Self-Help Group from Teertha village in Karnataka received the prestigious UNDP Equator Initiative Award for women-led climate action in 2025. Since 2018, they have advanced natural farming, millet-based mixed cropping, community seed conservation, and climate-resilient practices while producing value-added millet products with solar-powered technologies. This has ensured food security and livelihood improvement for women across 30 villages. (Times of India, 2025.)

"Seeds of Resistance" -Political Act of Seed Saving:-

In the Seeds of Resistance feature, environmentalist Vandana Shiva speaks to the idea that saving seeds is both activism and heritage, especially among women farmers who have kept biodiversity through generational wisdom. The efforts at Navdanya are presented as a combination of ecological conservation, community empowerment, and resistance against corporate control over seeds. (Global Fund for Women, n.d.)

Anti-Mining and Anti-Dam Protests Led By Women:-

In Neem Ka Thana, Rajasthan, women from 18 villages have mounted a sustained campaign against the illicit mining of soapstone, which has ravaged the Girjan River and farmland. Coordinated by the Prakriti BachaoSangharsh Samiti, they use relational protests, folk songs, and cultural gatherings in mobilizing communities to pressure the authorities. (Times of India, 2024.)

In Chhattisgarh's HasdeoAranya forest, Adivasi women have replicated Chipko-style tree-hugging protests to resist coal mining in one of the most biodiverse regions of central India. At the forefront are leaders like Sunita Porte and BijayantiKhusro, who have organized marches-most recently, a 300-km rally to Raipur-against deforestation and in assertion of forest rights. These have so far stalled most planned mining projects, saving more than 445,000 acres of forest. (Down To Earth 2022; People's Dispatch 2024)

Youth And Grassroots Climate Action:-

The young women activists in the Fridays for Future India network have organized climate strikes, educational workshops, and community clean-ups in urban and rural areas, framing climate change as a justice issue linked to gender, caste, and livelihood rights. Grassroots women's solar cooperatives, such as those in Gujarat and Rajasthan, have trained rural women as solar engineers, known as "Solar Mamas," to electrify villages in a sustainable way, reducing carbon emissions while providing a source of income.

Forms Of Resistance: Strategies And Methods:-

The ecological movements led by women in India have indeed used a variety of strategies: to resist, to symbolize, and to reform. These methods involve moral symbolism, cultural mobilization, participatory media, and structural intervention firmly rooted in Gandhian nonviolence and the ethics of ecofeminism.

Nonviolent Actions and Symbolic Resistance:-

Tree-hugging (Chipko-style protests):-

The iconic Chipko Movement taking root in the 1970s saw women embracing trees as nonviolent resistance against logging. Through physical humanizing of trees, women created situations wherein loggers were morally compelled to pause operations, marrying eco-feminist care with Gandhian satyagraha.

Cultural Mobilization and Folk Expression:-

Songs, dances, WhatsApp rosters:-

Women protesters in Neem Ka Thana had used folk songs and choreography to galvanize communities and kept protest drives running for more than a year. Resistance had become ritual as WhatsApp groups scheduled fortnightly rotations that ensured solidarity was forged.-(Times of India, 2025)

Legal, Political, and Institutional Advocacy:-

Judicial action and hunger strikes:-

While the protest continues, the Narmada BachaoAndolan also champions legal resistance through PILs, Jal Satyagraha, and hunger strikes. It was these means that delayed funding, later forcing a policy rethink. Time (2020); Vision IAS (2024)

Youth Climate Activism & Digital Mobilization:-

Global school strikes & media activism:-

Youth leaders like Ridhima Pandey organized climate strikes along with Fridays for Future, mobilizing hundreds in Dehradun, and linked local environmental frictions with global climate narratives. Wikipedia citation is available, but we'll omit it per your request; instead relying on media profiles like Frontline or Guardian if needed. A recent study in *Frontiers in Communication* featured how marginalized women from the Himalayas used digital storytelling to assert environmental justice narratives, mediating grassroots knowledge with broader advocacy. (Kalyanwala 2025)

Women's Cooperatives & Alternative Livelihood Practices:-

Seed banks & community farming:-

The community seed banks of Navdanya empower women farmers to preserve biodiversity and resist commercial seed monopolies. Therein, it roots ecological resistance in traditional practices. In Karnataka, the Bibi Fatima Self-Help Group used millet-based agro-ecology and solar-powered mills to model livelihood resilience, thus winning the UNDP Equator Initiative Award. (Times of India, 2025)

Feminist Climate Justice Framework:-

A more recent gender-focused climate study proposes that truly equitable climate action must be transformative-not just inclusive. It identifies five interconnected strategies: feminist leadership, social protection, women-led cooperatives, regional-language climate media, and integration with public schemes. These are directly aligned with methods seen in Indian women's movements (Saigal & Srivastava, 2025).

Challenges Faced By Women Environmental Activists:-

Criminalisation and Legal Harassment:-

Women climate defenders in India are regularly criminalized, put under surveillance, and face strategic lawsuits against public participation. For example, in February 2021, climate activist Disha Ravi was arrested over an online "toolkit" in support of the farmers' protests, booked under sedition, and released on bail after widespread criticism that the charges were disproportionate and politically motivated. Around the world, judicial harassment has now become the most prevalent form of attack on environmental defenders, with over 3,300 documented cases. SLAPPs have been increasingly used to intimidate and silence public-interest advocates.

Violence and Gendered Risks:-

Environmental defenders in many parts of the world are facing physical violence and killings. Global Witness reported 196 killings of land and environmental defenders in 2023, although actual numbers are likely much higher due to underreporting. Women activists are particularly vulnerable to online harassment, sexualised threats, and targeted smear campaigns-both in physical space and through technology-facilitated violence.

Youth and Intersectional Vulnerabilities:-

Children and youth activists face especially heightened risks of smear campaigns, arrests, and threats by state and non-state actors, particularly young women. UN experts have highlighted the need for increased protection for such groups. Intersectional factors of gender, indigeneity, caste, and rural marginality serve only to increase these vulnerabilities by further limiting access to legal aid, protective networks, and media coverage.

Procedural Exclusion in Environmental Decision-Making:-

Exclusion of consent from women in forest communities about development and conservation projects is also reported despite the FRA, 2006. In some cases, compensation is not given to unmarried women, nor are they taken seriously in decision-making processes (The Migration Story, 2025). Over fifteen years since the FRA was enacted, reports indicate that its implementation remains weak, with community forest rights largely unrecognized, and rejection rates high in several states, as reported by Mongabay-India, 2024; Down To Earth, 2025.

Socio-Economic Pressures and Retaliation:-

Mining, dam, and conservation projects continue to displace women, particularly Adivasi, into insecure, low-paid labor. Economic insecurity may suppress active mobilization or public critiques, as it challenges one's livelihood and personal safety.

Policy and Legal Reforms Needed:-

Strengthening Legal Protection for Environmental Defenders:-

Despite repeated calls by UN Special Rapporteurs, India has not yet enacted a dedicated law on protecting environmental defenders. The development of a national framework for the protection of environmental and human rights defenders would prevent arbitrary arrests, reduce the misuse of sedition and anti-terror laws, and provide timely legal assistance to women activists against harassment or SLAPPs.

Integrating Gender into Climate and Environmental Policy:-

Climate policies usually ignore gendered vulnerabilities. India's State Action Plans on Climate Change can be reshaped by introducing gender-responsive budgeting, land rights of women, and leading roles in decision-making bodies. According to UN Women (2023), Saigal and Srivastava (2025) point out that policies have to shift from token inclusion to transformative change by embedding feminist leadership, livelihood security, and social protection for women at the forefront of climate justice initiatives.

Ensuring Effective Implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA):-

Although the Forest Rights Act, 2006 gives recognition to women's rights over forest resources, its implementation falls short. High rejection rates of claims regarding community forest rights, delays in the procedure, and uncompensated relocation in the case of unmarried women are some of the issues that have been reported (Mongabay-India, 2024; The Migration Story, 2025). The monitoring mechanisms can be strengthened, women represented in the Gram Sabhas, and violations penalized for better compliance.

Protection Against SLAPPs and Judicial Harassment:-

These are legislative measures that should be promoted to identify and throw out strategic lawsuits against public participation early in the court process. This approach has been taken by some countries to protect journalists and activists from having to use up significant financial and emotional resources on long legal battles.

Expanding Support for Women-Led Sustainable Initiatives:-

Other government schemes, like the National Rural Livelihoods Mission and the National Mission on Sustainable Agriculture, can be scaled up to provide targeted funding for women's cooperatives, community seed banks, and solar energy projects. This would allow them to scale up and replicate successful climate-resilient models, as by Navdanya and the Bibi Fatima Self-Help Group. (Times of India 2025; Navdanya, n.d.)

Conclusion:-

The women-led ecological movements in India symbolize a powerful confluence of Gandhian nonviolence, ecofeminist ethics, and grassroots resilience. From the tree-hugging protests of Chipko onward into contemporary campaigns against mining, deforestation, and climate injustice, women steadily reframed environmental struggles as struggles for both ecological balance and social equity.

These movements simultaneously contest extractive development models while constructing viable alternatives, such as community seed banks, organic farming networks, and solar cooperatives, which embody sustainable living and climate resilience in concrete ways. Yet, as documented by human rights groups, women environmental defenders continue to be subjected to legal harassment, gendered violence, economic pressures, and procedural exclusion from decision-making processes.

This would require policy reform beyond the goals of inclusion towards genuine transformation: legal protection to defenders; integration of gender in climate policies; strengthening of the Forest Rights Act; and support to women-led ecological initiatives. Indeed, such a set of actions would uphold not only environmental justice but also meet the aspiration of an India where swaraj will extend to people and the planet.

Amplifying women's voices propels India toward an approach to climate action that is critical at this moment and rooted in care, equity, and sustainability. Women's leadership in such movements provides, at once, a moral compass and practical route into climate justice in the twenty-first century.

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