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## **Indian Women Activists of Ecofeminism**

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### **Abstract:**

The present research endeavour is an attempt to encapsulate the role of Indian Women activists to the Ecofeminist movement. Ecofeminism emerged as a recent activism oriented philosophy committed to surface the interconnections between the degradation of natural environment and the exploitation of women and other oppressed classes of the world. The intention of ecofeminist philosophy is to encompass all those philosophies that trigger the protection of natural environment for a sustainable living. It advocates the significance of a lifestyle in harmony with nature for the ultimately holistic development. As the ecofeminist philosophy draws a parallel between woman and nature adhering to their ethic of care, it becomes a matter of pride to probe the Indian women activists with their distinguishing shares to the environmental protection drives of the globe termed as Ecofeminism.

**Keywords: Activist, Ecofeminism, Environmentalism, Nature, Protection.**

We belong to the country of Bhagwad Geeta. The eternal philosophy of Bhagwad Geeta honours the progeny of the universe by stating ‘Vasudhaiv Kutumbkam’ meaning the whole world is one home, moreover, the ultramodern technological inventions connect the people over the entire globe, however, on the other side, the deteriorating stature of mother earth keeps haunting human

minds due to the horrible experiences of environmental degradation. What the hell humanity has done with nature's bounty is a matter of immense concern. Human actions guided by the patriarchal motif have enforced an upheaval in the natural climate hatching the disasters like global warming, drastic weather change, environmental pollution etc. This negative transformation of nature is the sheer result of exploitative human tendencies for material gains.

The protection of natural environment stands as a glaring issue as today's world continuously suffers setbacks due to multiple natural calamities like floods, hurricanes, Tsunamis, bitter droughts, soil erosion, earthquakes and so on, moreover, these optimal weather changes now have become a matter of profound concern for the citizens of the globe. Nonetheless, the extremely advanced methods and means of natural devastation have notoriously damaged the reservoir of nature endangering the biodiversity and ecosystems of the earth. The surging environment nowadays not only affects human lives but also other animal and plant species. Due to these terrible effects many species are enforced in the category of being endangered and many more getting extinguished. This glaring situation enforced the neglected and affected masses to enrage protests against the patriarchal cult by safeguarding their human rights to avail pure natural environment thereby preserving nature's bounty for their future. This innovative term received recognition as 'Ecofeminsm' and can be understood with multiple dimensions. Ecofeminsm is a branch of feminism that deals with the inter-relationships between women and nature owing to their common attributes of creativity, care taking and nurturing. The term ecofeminism was first coined by the French writer Francoise-d-Eaubonne in her book *Feminisme-ou-la-Mort* in 1974. She stressed the fact that "The destruction of the planet is due to the profit motive inherent in male power". (Nhanenge, 98) Ecofeminist philosophers raise the issue that ecological feminist perspective significantly contributes to establish equality for



women and preservation of nature in the patriarchal power structures. To put it more potentially, ecofeminism deals not only with the oppression of women but also with the devastation of nature and their interconnectedness by intending the liberation of both. It advocates women's independence by overturning economies and social hierarchies by considering their prominent attribute of care-taking enhanced with compassion and nonviolence. Ecofeminist philosophy instigates ardent fight to save mother Earth from her tremendous exploitation, besides, it also demands eradication of animal oppression by supporting their rights.

In this continuum, the need to venture through the philosophy of ecofeminism is direly felt. While this advent is undertaken, theories and philosophies connecting the degradation of mother Earth with subordination of women and other oppressed classes in the world including gender, racial, geographical, ethnic and caste discriminations prove substantially thought provoking. Hence, the significance to investigate these connections and interconnections is duly felt. Besides, since primitive days women's role integrated in the environmental protection attracts cognizance. Obviously, they are ardent caretakers of nature. Their attachment with nature inspires them to protect and nurture mother Earth by controlling the pollution that stands as a major obstacle in the process of environmental preservation. Hence, this research is a humble effort to locate the space of Indian women in the protection of natural environment. As it is expressed through the below lines, it is a glaring fact that earth provides for human need not for human greed:

“The earth provides in abundance  
For the access of the humans  
But how sad a remorse  
To upheaval her in reverse!” (Avachar, 23)

Besides this sacred land of ours in which the highest inspiration for environmental conservation is deeply rooted is the sacred land of saints and social reformers who devoted their lives for the well being of the world. A keen probe into the history of Maharashtra and India helps to understand how environmental preservation happened to be a part and parcel of the daily lifestyle of these sane classes. During the course of developmental phases environmental exploitation emerged as an extremely complex phenomenon posing stark illusions of false material progress. At the global level, various efforts are being undertaken to cease environmental destruction and ensure its conservation. However, as long as the established systems are not going to abandon their hypocrisy, the effectiveness of these struggles and measures will remain obscure.

In 1974, French writer Françoise-d-Eaubonne first introduced the concept of ecofeminism in her book *Feminism or Death*, linking environmental protection with the rights of marginalized communities. Ecofeminism does not relate itself solely with environmental issues; rather, it examines the interrelationship between environmental protection and the rights of oppressed groups worldwide. It is a struggle aimed at safeguarding both nature and the rights of marginalized communities. In this sense, philosophy of ecofeminism acquires position as a universal philosophy.

Since time immemorial, indigenous communities across the world leave no stone unturned to convey through their ecofriendly gestures that the pure natural environment intensely belongs to them. In environmental and human rights movements worldwide, women's participation and leadership are notably prominent. Although the origins of ecofeminist movements are often traced to environmental struggles in the United States during the 1970s, a closer look at history



reveals that such movements existed across the world much earlier. From the 1970s onward, and continuing into the present, ecofeminism has evolved as a right-based framework responding to environmental challenges globally. Movements such as India's Chipko Movement and Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement in Kenya are notable examples.

In the Indian context, this discussion examines when and how the movement emerged, its objectives, methods, outcomes, and achievements. In reality, the struggle for environmental protection has continued across ages. Within a patriarchal social structure, development driven exploitation of environmental resources causes irreparable damage to nature, despite full awareness of its consequences. When the established system actively joins hands in such exploitation, it becomes a matter of grave concern. In post-independence India, a Western model of industrialization was adopted under the name of development, systematically neglecting environmental damage in pursuit of material progress. Consequently, environmental protection became a rampant issue.

From the 1970s onward, numerous environmental movements sprouted in India. Beyond the well-known ones, many significant struggles emerged across the country are marked by women's active participation and leadership. These movements responded to region-specific environmental challenges, such as opposition to the Gomati River dam in Tripura, the Bhagirathi conservation movement, resistance to the Tehri Dam, and protests against the Kaiga nuclear project in Karnataka. Indian women's contribution to ecofeminist movements is evident across all these struggles.

Among the most prominent is the Chipko Movement, which began in 1973. This was a pioneering struggle in which women risked their lives to protect forests. In the Alaknanda

Valley's Reni village (in present day Uttarakhand), the government granted permission to a commercial company to fell the trees. Utilizing the absence of village men who were already skillfully sent away for the smooth cutting of the trees, contractors began cutting trees while only women and children remained in the village at the time of massacre. Understanding the deception, the women embraced the trees and formed protective circles around them. Under the leadership of Gaura Devi, along with Sudesha Devi and Bachni Devi, they courageously resisted, even when threatened with humiliation. Ultimately, the contractors were forced to retreat, saving thousands of trees. 'Chipko' literally means 'to cling,' symbolizing women's firm resolve to protect forests. Later, environmentalist Sunderlal Bahuguna led the movement, which became a model for environmental conservation worldwide.

Following this, the Narmada Bachao Andolan began in 1984 against the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River. Under the leadership of Medha Patkar, the displaced tribal communities, farmers, environmentalists, and local residents united to protest ecological destruction and human displacement. Supported by Baba Amte, the movement emphasized that development projects must not proceed without balancing human livelihoods and environmental sustainability. Both Medha Patkar and Baba Amte were honoured with the Right Livelihood Award for their incredible contribution and support to Narmada Bachao Andolan. Although compromises were eventually signed, the 35 year long struggle inspired numerous environmental movements.

Another significant ecofeminist activism in India undertaken with a women's initiative is Vandana Shiva's Navdanya Movement and the concept of seed democracy. Vandana Shiva, a global symbol of Indian environmentalism, actively opposed the environmental destruction model of Western-style development and exposed the political underpinnings of the Green



Revolution. Through extensive writing and global advocacy, she emphasized indigenous seed conservation and organic farming. Her books *Staying Alive* and *Earth Democracy* articulate her ideas of organic farming with the initiatives of women farmers. She has authored over 20 books and has strongly opposed multinational corporations like Monsanto. Thousands of women became a part and parcel of Navdanya movement working tirelessly for organic farming and environmental sustainability. Vandana Shiva has been felicitated with the Right Livelihood Award for her outstanding contribution to preserve nature through indigenous varieties of plants and grains.

One of the gravest environmental disasters of the twentieth century was the Bhopal Gas Tragedy of December 2, 1984. Over half a million people were affected by the toxic gas leak, many suffering permanent disabilities. Two women survivors Rashida Bee and Champa Devi Shukla led a determined struggle against Union Carbide and the complicit system to secure justice for victims. Both were awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2004 for their prolonged breathtaking struggle to protect natural environment.

In recent times, Padma Shri awardee Rahibai Popere, known as the ‘Seed Mother,’ has emerged as a notable ecofeminist figure. Rahibai, an indigenous woman farmer from Kombhalne village in Maharashtra’s Ahmednagar district has conserved over 154 indigenous varieties of vegetables through a ‘seed bank’. By involving local women, she has promoted natural farming by using traditionally original seeds. She not only practices ecofriendly farming but travels across the state extensively to gain support and spread awareness regarding the need to protect the indigenous plants and grains. She was honoured with the Padma Shri, India’s prestigious civilian honour for

her benevolence towards natural environment. The renowned Indian scientist Dr. Raghunath Mashelkar rightfully conferred upon her the title 'Beej Mata' meaning 'Seed Mother'.

Despite ongoing awareness efforts and drives, societal traditional approach towards conservation of environment remains largely stagnant that is a huge tragedy. Considering the future of coming generations, more and more number of women must actively engage themselves in environmental and human rights movements. As Mahatma Phule and Savitribai Phule emphasized, educating one woman educates an entire family; similarly, when a woman becomes an environmental conservationist, the whole family soon starts walking on her path.

In a culture that reveres food as divine, it is deeply ironic that struggles are required to protect the farmland, nature and environment that produce the varieties of foods. Patriarchal models of development justify destructive exploitation of nature as inevitable. In such circumstances, women, the creators of life, aren't expected to remain silent, even if their voices are often suppressed. Briefing it, it could be admitted that movements led by women and marginalized groups to protect environment immensely contribute to the protection of human rights as well. This struggle has to go a long way as unsustainable development continues to exploit nature relentlessly. Sustainable development is impossible if nature is sidelined. Humanity, within its brief existence, has caused irreparable damage to Earth's resources. As mothers, women must prioritize the welfare of the future generations, for both women and the Earth give selflessly and are the caretakers. In addition to nurturing, imbibing the values of natural protection is women's fundamental responsibility. Earth speaks through her actions; it is up to humanity to listen and understand. Greed, excessive accumulation, and material obsession are the serious causes of environmental devastation. Material pleasures stand immaterial without a healthy life and



healthy life solely depends on healthy environment. An understanding that human beings are temporary trustees of natural resources on this planet should lead to a sensible behaviour like all these women who have been tirelessly protecting the nature and earth. Instilling this awareness in future generations is a woman's essential duty so also it's the prime aim of men folk as well. What matters today is contentment through restraint, minimal consumption, and maximum reuse. Indian women and marginalized communities will continue their agitations for the protection and conservation of natural environment until the patriarchal systems awake, arise and alter their ways to save mother earth by becoming a part in the noble mission of environmental preservation as:

Woman, Earth, and Nature,  
The three united by one gesture,  
All three care for future generation,  
And forever serve with devotion.  
Together they contribute to sustain  
Human rights and the natural grain!  
-Dr. Sangeeta G. Avachar

Inferentially, ecofeminism as an activist philosophy thrives as a political upsurge accelerated by practical concerns for the above mentioned Indian women activists to protect the environment friendly existence. Ecofeminist activism enthralled the identities of women and nature, health of underestimated classes, scientific and technological advancements, treatment of animals, peace, anti-nuclear, anti-militarist and anti-war activism. Consequently, it is admitted that any theory of ecofeminism must be thought provokingly serious regarding grassroots activism, which, in turn

is triggered by the interpretation of the fundamentals of subordination. Marching ahead further ecofeminist movements sharply criticise most of the current social and political institutions worldwide. Nonetheless, the ecofeminist crusades contrast political thoughts with an aim to deconstruct oppressive social, economic and political dogmas and intend to produce more viable reconstructive beliefs. It means grassroots activism provides platforms for ecofeminism promoting direct action from the beginning. Henceforth, ecofeminism enables both deconstructive and reconstructive models for exclusive transformation of the societal behaviours for preservation of nature and ceasing of domination of nature and the oppressed entities. Ecofeminists strive to encourage life preserving values and policies by making them available in the popular province through fraternity councils. Multiple versions of ecofeminism facilitate with multiple political strands for spearheading the activism of the powerful Indian women activists. For this purpose, they follow a set of practices enrooted in the specific cultural, historical, material and political contexts.

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