

Women Environmentalists in India: A Study of Living and Legacy Voices of Ecological Resistance

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Abstract—This research is aimed at studying the contributions of Gandhian women environmentalists in India through evaluating both contemporary and historic women who have contributed to the fight for the environment and for social transformation. The research will use secondary sources to analyze how different generations of women environmentalists have demonstrated and applied basic principles of Gandhism, including the principle of ahimsa (non-violence), the principle of sarvodaya (welfare of all), as well as trusteeship. Such prominent representatives of women's environmental activists as Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, and Sunita Narain will be compared to legacy Gandhian women environmentalists, such as Gaura Devi and Sugathakumari. Thus, a comparative analysis of such women in environmental activism will show how the concepts of Gandhian environmental philosophy are alive among them, and what are the differences in the methods of women activists. Based on the analysis and discussion, the conclusion will be made regarding the continuity of Gandhian environmental philosophy in women's activism.

Index Terms—Gandhian Philosophy, Women Environmentalists, Environmental Movements, Ahimsa, Sustainability, Ecofeminism, India, Grassroots Activism

I. Introduction

The degradation of the environment has emerged as one of the major problems facing the current world due to industrialization, developmental practices, and the over-exploitation of natural resources. Problems such as deforestation, water shortage, loss of biodiversity, and climate change have affected both the ecological system and human society, especially developing nations such as India (Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997). In such cases, alternative philosophies based on ethics, sustainability, and community have become increasingly important.

The environmental philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi is very relevant in addressing the relationship between human beings and nature. Gandhi advocated for values such as simplicity, self-control, ahimsa (non-violence), and sarvodaya (welfare of all), emphasizing a development philosophy based on ecological equilibrium and justice rather than material progress (Gandhi, 1909/2009; Iyer, 2000). The criticism of the model of industrial modernity and decentralization practiced by Gandhi has close similarities with the current discourse on sustainability and environmental ethics (Guha, 2000). Though Gandhi did not develop any environmental philosophy explicitly, his philosophy has greatly influenced the environmental movement in India.

In the wider context mentioned above, women have been instrumental in environmental protection and resource conservation, especially at the grassroots level. The close link that women in rural India share with natural resources like water, forests, and land has made them major stakeholders as well as effective environmental managers (Agarwal, 1992). It is their direct experience of environmental degradation that motivates them towards collective struggle against exploitation. Various studies have confirmed that

women's involvement in environmental governance brings about a sustainable and equitable approach towards solving ecological problems (Agarwal, 2009).

It is interesting to see how Gandhian philosophy and women's environmental activism intersect with each other in a variety of ways in different Indian environmental movements. Many of the initiatives taken by women have relied on the use of Gandhian tactics in order to protect the environment. For example, historically speaking, Chipko movement led by Gaura Devi and contemporary environmental activism by Vandana Shiva and Medha Patkar have all been instances where women proved their dedication for environmental protection based on ethics and collectivism (Guha, 1989; Shiva, 1988).

Although past research has considered women environmental movement and Gandhian thought individually, there is still the necessity for the examination of the link between the values of Gandhism in successive generations of women environmental activists. Moreover, an in-depth comparative analysis of such both living and dead representatives would enable gaining more knowledge of the evolution of Gandhian ideals through different sociopolitical situations.

This paper attempts to fill in the gap through the comparative and analytical consideration of Gandhian women environmentalists in India. The main objective of this research is to show how women's environmental struggle is rooted in Gandhian ideals of peace, sustainability, and social justice. This paper would thus contribute to an understanding of the importance of women as the main agents of ecological resistance and sustainable development in India.

II. Gandhian Environmental Philosophy

The environmental philosophy based on Gandhian philosophy does not constitute any formal theory of ecology but provides a very insightful ethical basis of the interrelationship of humanity and nature. The key ideas put forward by Mahatma Gandhi were simplicity, austerity, and ethics, whereby he recommended living in such a manner as to minimize damage to the individual and environment. His opposition to industrialization, materialism, and uncontrolled economic development show a very early realization of problems inherent in our contemporary ecology (Guha, 2000).

2.1 Ahimsa (Nonviolence) and Ecological Ethics

Non-violence is a key concept in Gandhian thought. Though usually meant to imply a non-violent attitude towards humans, Gandhi extended this idea to cover non-human life forms and nature itself. Exploitation of nature was viewed as violence, since it upset the balance and harmed not only current but future generations as well (Gandhi, 1909/2009).

From the environmental point of view, the principle of ahimsa suggests living in accord with nature through restrained resource use. Environmental interpretation of non-violence means taking care of nature and using resources rationally. It is worth noting that some scholars see Gandhian non-violence as ecological ethics (Parekh, 1997).

2.2 Sarvodaya (Welfare of All) and Environmental Justice

The notion of sarvodaya, which means "welfare for all," represents the philosophy of Gandhi's idea of an ideal society. The term suggests that development must be inclusive and must involve all layers of the population especially the most underprivileged. From the point of view of ecology, sarvodaya can be compared with the notion of environmental justice that aims at ensuring equitable distribution of environmental advantages and disadvantages.

Sarvodaya envisions an alternative model of development that does not involve exploitation and considers economic development secondary to ecological and social development. Such an approach to resource utilization and management implies community-oriented development that is very important in rural settings where the negative impact on the environment tends to harm marginalized populations, such as women (Kumarappa, 1951).

2.3 Trusteeship and Sustainable Resource Use

The concept of trusteeship is yet another important aspect of Gandhian philosophy that has important environmental dimensions. According to Gandhi, an individual and society should be the “trustee” of nature and its resources, use them in a way that preserves them for the future generations (Gandhi, 1947/2009). It implies that absolute ownership is not advocated by this principle.

This concept allows one to develop moral grounds for sustainable development because it calls for moderate use of resources and fair allocation of the latter. Individuals are asked to focus on the needs of the community and the environment rather than on personal interests. Scholars note that this principle reflects the contemporary approach to sustainability (Iyer, 2000).

2.4 Critique of Industrialization and Advocacy of Sustainable Living

However, Gandhian philosophy was quite critical about industrialization, which he thought causes environmental pollution, social inequalities, and corruption in morals. He criticized the extensive exploitation of nature caused by industrial and economic growth, noting that “the Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s need, but not every man’s greed” (Gandhi, as cited in Iyer, 2000).

Gandhian philosophy proposes decentralized economy in villages, where people are not dependent on the industry, but use the local resources to meet their needs. The focus on simplicity, minimum consumption, and usage of local resources is close to modern concepts of sustainable development (Schumacher, 1973).

2.5 Relevance of Gandhian Philosophy to Contemporary Environmental Issues

The Gandhian environmental philosophy is extremely pertinent to deal with the problems of today’s environment, such as environmental crimes, climate change, and depletion of resources. Non-violence, ethics, and community management of resources become an important part of the Gandhian environmental philosophy and a useful tool to cope with the environmental degradation.

Gandhian environmental philosophy is especially relevant in the rural parts of India where many environmental organizations work. The actions and methods of these organizations, such as non-violent struggle and sustainable utilization of the available resources, show the pertinence of the Gandhian philosophy to the modern environmental activism (Guha, 2000). The application of Gandhian philosophy to the environmental crimes helps to understand these crimes not just as social phenomena but also as ethical activities.

III. Women and Environmentalism in India: A Theoretical Perspective

It is common to discuss the connection between women and the environment in India from the perspectives of gender studies, environmental sociology, and development studies. More specifically, it is possible to state that in rural areas women play a prominent role in maintaining the subsistence of their households and management of the natural resources and, thus, can be viewed as key players in protecting the environment. This chapter will focus on theoretical aspects of women’s environmental involvement.

3.1 Gendered Relationship with Natural Resources

In India, women usually have the role of gathering water, wood for firewood, fodder, and practicing subsistence agriculture within their rural family households. In this way, they have constant contact with the environment which results in their intimate connection with the environment. Therefore, women usually have great ecological knowledge about the diversity of nature and sustainable resource use (Agarwal, 1992).

On the other hand, women are vulnerable to any environmental destruction because the scarcity of resources means increased load on women. It means that environmental degradation can have adverse effects on their physical condition, time use and economic opportunities. In this way, it becomes clear that environmental degradation has gender dimensions since it affects women more than men (Agarwal, 2009).

Nevertheless, the experience of environmental transformation encourages women to participate in resource protection and collective action. Women are able to act in response to ecological problems owing to their special position of users and protectors of the resources.

3.2 Ecofeminism and Feminist Environmentalism

Ecofeminism is an essential perspective on the connection between gender and the environment. The theory states that women's oppression and domination over nature are part of the same process occurring within the patriarchal structures. According to Vandana Shiva, an important ecofeminist philosopher, the systems of knowledge possessed by women are consistent with ecological principles and preservation of biodiversity (Shiva, 1988).

Ecofeminism reveals how development strategies based on industrialization and economic interests often marginalize not only women but also nature itself. It requires different strategies focused on ecological balance and local knowledge.

Nevertheless, the ecofeminist approach has been criticized. Bina Agarwal opposes any essentialist views about women being more connected with nature. She introduces the idea of “feminist environmentalism” that takes into account the influence of material factors on the interaction of women and the environment.

3.3 Women's Role in Environmental Movements

Women have been at the forefront of many environmental movements in India and have even spearheaded many movements for protecting the environment. These movements are defined by the collective mobilization of people and the use of non-violent methods of protest.

Chipko movement is one of the most famous movements where rural women, with Gaura Devi as their leader, protected the forest from destruction by hugging trees and refusing to let them be felled. The Chipko movement is not only an example of how important the forest is to the livelihoods of rural communities but also an example of how women can successfully fight for protection of the environment (Guha, 1989).

There are many other environmental movements led by contemporary environmentalists such as Medha Patkar who fight against displacement of people, water rights and environmental justice.

3.4 Women as Agents of Environmental Governance

In the past few decades, the importance of women's contribution to environmental governance has been realized. Research indicates that women's involvement in community institutions for resource management, such as forest committees and water user groups, results in better conservation efforts and a more balanced distribution of resources (Agarwal, 2009).

The contribution of women in governance does not stop at institutional frameworks, but extends to informal systems and community efforts that help sustain the environment. The ecological knowledge of women, in conjunction with their experience in managing resources, helps them be effective change agents for the environment.

3.5 Relevance to the Present Study

The theories outlined above form an extensive body of knowledge regarding the significance of women environmentalists in India. Gendering of resource use makes women more connected with the environment, whereas ecofeminism and feminist environmentalism help one understand the structure and ideology of environmentalism.

Such a theory is applicable to the current research as it involves analyzing Gandhian women environmentalists from different generations. Women environmentalism based on nonviolence, collective action, and sustainability is highly consistent with the principles of Gandhi. The research aims at applying theoretical knowledge for analysis of how women environmentalists reinterpret Gandhi's ideas within the context of environmental protection and social justice.

IV. Living Gandhian Women Environmentalists in India

Modern Indian environmental movements have seen the remarkable efforts of women who, by their activism, uphold the values that are consistent with Gandhian philosophy. Women environmentalists deal with a range of ecological issues including biodiversity conservation, displacement, water management, and sustainable development. The approach of these activists who rely on non-violent actions and ecological and community-based participation shows that Gandhian ideas are relevant in contemporary environmental discourse.

4.1 Vandana Shiva

One of the most famous contemporary Indian environmentalists is Vandana Shiva whose main areas of concern are biodiversity conservation, seed sovereignty, and ecofeminism. She promotes the protection of indigenous knowledge and sustainable agriculture through various initiatives, including Navdanya (Shiva, 1988). Shiva criticizes the exploitative aspects of industrial agriculture and globalization, thus pointing out their ecological and social implications.

The philosophy of Shiva can be considered Gandhian in terms of the ideas of self-reliance, local economies, and non-violent opposition to the corporate exploitation of natural resources. Her support for organic farming and biodiversity conservation relates to the Gandhian notion of trusteeship implying the responsible use of resources for the benefit of everyone.

4.2 Medha Patkar

Medha Patkar is known for her activism in the Narmada Bachao Andolan, which is a struggle against dam projects and fights for the rights of those displaced by such constructions. The activist raises the issue of environmental justice, displacement, and equitable development, bringing attention to the socio-economic aspects of large infrastructures (Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997).

Peaceful protests, hunger strikes, and other activities of Patkar as an activist represent the Gandhian ethics through ahimsa. Moreover, the activist's dedication to social justice and sustainable development fits well into the concept of sarvodaya, which stands for improving the wellbeing of the poor and oppressed people.

4.3 Sunita Narain

An important Indian environmentalist Sunita Narain has been an active participant in environmental politics in India for many years. Being one of the leaders of the Centre for Science and Environment, she deals with such matters as water management, air pollution, and sustainable development policies.

It is clear from Narain's ideas that they follow Gandhian principles because she advocates for the notions of sustainability, decentralization, and communal activities. Her support for such concepts as rainwater harvesting and community water management system represents the Gandhian notion of sustainable communities. Moreover, her interest in environmental justice and equity represents the Gandhian idea of sarvodaya.

4.4 Discussion: Gandhian Ideals in Modern Environmental Movements

The actions of contemporary women activists show the applicability of Gandhian philosophies to modern environmental problems. While these women differ in the areas of their interests and methods used, it is still possible to see a number of common features in their activism. For example, they apply the idea of ahimsa in the form of peaceful resistance and ethically correct approach towards environmental problems. The idea of sarvodaya is used by women activists to promote balanced development and protect marginalized communities.

Not only do these women resist harmful environmental policies, but they also put forward models of development that are sustainable and equitable and based on local knowledge systems. This shows how dynamic and evolving is the concept of Gandhi in relation to the environment.

V. Legacy of Women Environmentalists Following Gandhian Philosophy

The history of Indian environmentalism shows the significant role played by women, who through bravery, sacrifice, and collaboration established the foundations of contemporary environmentalism in India. Not only did these individuals resist ecological devastation, but they were also committed to Gandhian principles of nonviolence, simplicity, and community welfare.

5.1 Gaura Devi

Another leader from India who has been instrumental in leading grassroots resistance movement against environmental damage is Gaura Devi, a leading Chipko activist in the Himalayan region. Gaura Devi led a resistance by the people of her village against the logging operations of timber contractors in 1974 through hugging the trees and preventing them from being cut down (Guha, 1989). The act of resistance was not only an effort of protecting her local livelihood but also reflected her ecological awareness.

The Chipko movement was a reflection of the dependency of rural communities, especially women, on forest resources. Gaura Devi's leadership was an indicator of how the women's experiences of environmental degradation could be translated into activism. Her methods were consistent with Gandhian philosophy of ahimsa since it was an act of nonviolent resistance and sarvodaya since it aimed at the protection of community welfare.

5.2 Sugathakumari

Sugathakumari, a famous poetess and environmental activist from Kerala, has played an important role in Silent Valley movement, where she helped to fight against the construction of a hydropower project that would destroy a tropical rainforest ecosystem.

Her struggle involved elements of culture along with ecological concerns in terms of literature and activism. Sugathakumari's literature expresses Gandhian values in terms of advocating nonviolent protest, ethical accountability, and preservation of nature as our common heritage. The success of the Silent Valley movement has proved a notable example of the effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns in relation to environmental policy-making (Gadgil & Guha, 1995).

5.3 Amrita Devi Bishnoi

This woman represents an early example of environmental resistance in India. In 1730, in the village of Khejarli in Rajasthan state, she gave her life in the fight against destruction of the forest performed by the representatives of the king. She, together with about 300 members of the Bishnoi community, embraced the trees thus performing the act of mass sacrifice which led to the cessation of the deforestation in this region.

"a chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree" her famous phrase reveals the deep ecological ethics of the Bishnoi community where environmental protection plays an important role. Though preceding Gandhi in time, her deeds were nonviolent and courageous as the values later associated with the Gandhian philosophy.

5.4 Discussion: Legacy and Continuity of Gandhian Values

Contributions made by such women illustrate that there exists a rich history of environmental activism among women in India. Their efforts, which were carried out in diverse socio-political environments, were based on one important idea – the need for the protection of nature using ethical and collective means.

One of the main characteristics of environmental activism of these women was the use of nonviolent means of resistance. This method was highly connected with the concept of Gandhian ahimsa. The actions of these women, such as hugging trees in the Chipko movement or the acts performed by Amrita Devi Bishnoi, prove the effectiveness of the nonviolent approach to the fight against environmental injustices.

Moreover, the focus on the interests of communities and balance in ecosystems demonstrates the presence of the concept of sarvodaya in these women's actions. They did not seek personal benefit, but fought for the welfare of present and future generations. Thus, their actions may be regarded as an early example of environmental justice.

Their legacy remains valuable today because it inspires many women who strive to protect the environment from environmental threats.

VI. Comparative Analysis: Continuity of Gandhian Ideals

It becomes clear that there are numerous continuities of Gandhian ideas and philosophy that characterize both the environmental efforts made by living women activists as well as those made by the legacy activists in India.

6.1 Continuity of Gandhian Principles

One of the most notable similarities between the legacy activists Gaura Devi, Sugathakumari, and Amrita Devi Bishnoi and the contemporary ones, such as Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, and Sunita Narain, is that they follow Gandhian principles.

Thus, the principle of ahimsa is present in their actions and methods of struggle since both the movements of the past, such as the Chipko movement, and those of the contemporary period make use of nonviolent resistance (Guha, 1989; Guha, 2000).

At the same time, the principle of sarvodaya (welfare of all) is seen in their efforts aimed at promoting the welfare of the communities, environmental justice, and equal distribution of natural resources. The principle of trusteeship is another one that is common for both periods. This continuity demonstrates the enduring relevance of Gandhian ethics in shaping environmental activism in India.

6.2 Differences in Context and Approach

However, there exist some differences that may be noted in regard to activism in its context and strategy. Legacy environmentalism was practiced mostly at a localized level in the rural areas where environmental concerns were connected to life-sustaining processes. Their activities were spontaneous and community-based and were aimed at solving immediate problems such as deforestation or extraction (Guha, 1989).

Contemporary environmentalism is concerned with a wider range of questions, namely with climate change, globalization, industrial pollution, and policy-oriented activism. The latter is practiced not only at the local level but is also extended to national and international arena and involves legal, academic, and institutional activities (Guha, 2000; Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997).

Thus, for example, whereas Gaura Devi's leadership within the Chipko movement entailed a physical opposition towards protecting forests, Vandana Shiva addresses much more systematized problems of corporatization of agriculture and loss of biodiversity (Shiva, 1988). Likewise, Medha Patkar's activism is characterized by both grass root movement and policy-related initiatives.

6.3 Evolution of Women's Environmental Activism

The transformation from past to present activism is also characterized by a change in the level and visibility of participation of women in environmental activities. While earlier movements were based on local knowledge and practices and had little recognition outside of their localities (Guha, 1989), women environmentalists have become more visible and influential, taking part in the national and international environmental debates.

In addition to this change in terms of visibility, women environmental activists moved from informal actions within their communities to more structured activism. Nevertheless, the basic principles of sustainability, ethical responsibility, and collective action have remained the same throughout these changes.

What is more important, contemporary activism has been supported by theoretical concepts, for example, ecofeminism, which explicitly explains the connection between gender and environment issues (Shiva, 1988).

6.4 Synthesis: Bridging Past and Present

Comparative Analysis

However, from the above comparison, one can identify continuity as well as changes in women's environment activism in India. Despite the fact that the methods and situations have changed, the same ethical approach that lies within Gandhian principles is still common for all generations.

Historical figures contributed to establishing the tradition of environmental protest through their demonstration of nonviolent and communal actions (Guha, 1989). Current activists continue the traditions of environmental protest by adding to them the problems of the modern world and maintaining Gandhian principles (Guha, 2000).

The above synthesis illustrates the need to treat environmental activism as an ongoing process that has roots in the history of the community and its current state.

VII. Conclusion

This study has tried to explore the contribution made by Gandhian women environmentalists in India through the study of both contemporary as well as legacy environmentalists who have made significant contributions towards environmental protection and social transformation. It can be seen from the analysis that the environmental activism by women in India is based on ethical grounds that are quite similar to Gandhian philosophy such as ahimsa, sarvodaya and trusteeship.

It has been observed from the findings of the study that the legacy environmentalists like Gaura Devi, Sugathakumari and Amrita Devi Bishnoi had taken the initiative of starting the movement for environmental resistance through nonviolent community activism which was mainly local and concerned with livelihood and survival but it had deep moral and ecological relevance.

On the other hand, the contemporary environmentalists like Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar and Sunita Narain have extended the concept of environmental activism to encompass global issues including globalization, climate change and environmental governance.

From the above analysis, we can observe that although the methods of activism have changed over time, the ethical basis has been maintained consistently from one generation to another. This proves the continued validity of Gandhian ideology in solving today's environmental problems. In addition, it should be noted that the present study shows that women are not just involved in activities but are also active agents of ecological resistance and sustainable development.

Through linking the past and present views, this paper tries to highlight the contribution of women in environmental movements and shows the need for incorporating an ethical, gender-sensitive, and community-based approach to environmental issues.

VIII. Policy Implications and Suggestions

Conclusions of this research have significant importance from the perspective of addressing environmental problems in a sustainable and inclusive way.

8.1 Acknowledgement of Women as Important Environmental Actors

Women must be identified by policies as central agents in terms of environmental protection and governance. Contribution made by women activists in the history and today should be acknowledged.

8.2 Decentralization and Empowerment of Communities and Local Initiatives

It is required to encourage decentralized environmental governance that would reflect Gandhian principle of self-reliance and collectivity. Promotion of participation of local communities in environmental activities is particularly important for involving women.

8.3 Provision of Institutional and Legal Support for Women Activists

Women environmentalists encounter various challenges connected with society, politics and institutions. It is required to establish appropriate legal protection and support systems for ensuring their rights and encouraging their activism.

8.4 Application of Gandhian Principles in Environmental Policies

Gandhian principles like non-violence, sustainability, trusteeship can help to lay an ethical foundation of environmental policies. They will contribute to balancing economic development and ecological protection.

8.5 Promoting Gender-Inclusive Environmental Governance

Inclusion of women in the decision-making processes through local government institutions, environmental committees, and policy discussions is very important. Gender-sensitive policies will play a big role in overcoming obstacles that women encounter and improving overall environmental governance.

8.6 Capacity Building and Awareness

It is necessary to implement educational and training programs aimed at increasing awareness and capacities of women for environmental management. Grassroots empowerment of women is an effective strategy for sustainable development and environmental protection.

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