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[Abstract: This paper explores the intersection of environmental justice and ecofeminism, emphasizing the essential connection between women and nature. Ecofeminism, as a movement, has evolved as a response to the patriarchal exploitation of the environment, asserting that achieving environmental justice requires acknowledging and valuing the unique bond between women and nature. The historical trajectory of ecofeminism is traced from its emergence in the 1970s, with notable movements and figures exemplifying women's pivotal role in environmental conservation. The paper also delves into the manifestation of ecofeminism in India, highlighting key movements and influential figures contributing to the dialogue on ecological preservation. Furthermore, the paper underscores the significance of ecofeminist perspectives in shaping environmental justice frameworks and contends that true justice can only be achieved by recognizing the intertwined issues of gender discrimination, racism, and ecological degradation.]

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Environmental Justice, Women and Nature, Green Belt Movement, Chipko Movement, Ecofeminism in India, Gender Discrimination, Racism, Intersectionality, etc.*

"We are either going to have a future where women lead the way to make peace with the Earth or we are not going to have a human future at all."

-Vandana Shiva

I

Introduction

The term environmental justice brings forth an umbrella notion, encompassing within it all social contributors that lead to a sustainable and inclusive way of life. The vision of environmental justice is not limited to the view of nature as a separate entity, but as one of the key elements in society, having a ubiquitous impact. Nature, men, women, animals, and biodiversity are actors in the dialectical ecosystem, all deserving attention and consideration. Justice puts forth the virtue of balancing the competing interests so as to not let any side be left in total neglect and oblivion. Justice, which is often envisioned to be done through balancing scales promotes the sacred values of non-discrimination, equity, and dignity. Justice cannot be

determined in abstract but under defined circumstances, being a subjective, rather than a universal concept. Thus, advancing on similar trajectory, ecofeminism tables the idea that environmental justice cannot be achieved without acknowledging the ingenious bond between women and the nature.

The patriarchal, expansionist, and conquering mindset of humans has led to the dilapidation of the environment at a rate more expedited than the effect of thousands of years combined. The irreversible harm done to nature only forces us to reassess our approach toward it- that it is not to be viewed merely as a reservoir of resources and potential profits, but is as essential as life itself. Life cannot be viewed separately from nature, and thus our relationship with nature needs to be redefined. Here, feminine vantage gains prominence.

Women, like nature itself, act as a reservoir of abundance, encompassing within them the ability to create and nurture life. Thus, their strings of connection with nature are deep-rooted and distinct from men who have a detached outlook. This is symbolised in Hindu scriptures, exhibiting Goddess Annapurna as nurturer, and provider of food and nutrition, on the disappearance of whom life ended. The anecdote behind her disappearance falls squarely in line with the ecofeminist arguments- i.e. when her role in the lives of gods, humans, and animals alike was considered trivial and inconsequential. Her reappearance with a bowl of porridge in one hand and ladle in another brought back the vitality and vigour in the world. Such is the bond between women and nature.

Women since decades have shared deep love and respect for nature. Being the ones responsible for maintaining food, fodder and water, there came a time when they weren't merely dependent upon nature, but rather were one with it. However, a blind eye was turned towards their knowledge, and experience with regard to the environment. It was on this front that ecofeminists took up the task of resuscitating the focus on women's relationship with nature for ensuring greater sustainability.

II

Evolution of Ecofeminism as A Movement

Ecological Feminism emerged as a social movement of thought which converged with the dynamic emergence of contemporary environmental movements of the West coupled with the increased global feminist movements that actively acclimatizes with the urgent requirements of social change.¹ A Marine biologist from America, Rachel Carson was the first to ever raise an ardent voice against the increasing levels of pollution and nature's degradation. As a result, a powerful movement started gaining momentum culminating into the celebration of Earth Day in 1970. However, this movement only charged up during the mid-1970s with collective voices of women acquiring a core place in the greening and improvement of the environment in the face of a series of environmental disasters.²

The term 'Eco-feminism' was used for the first time by Francoise d'Eaubonne in the year 1972 in her book 'Feminine Destruction.' Eco-feminism can be said to have originated from the belief that oppression and domination over women was primarily associated with the abuse of nature and ecology. Such movements were necessary in comprehending pertinent questions as to how the environment became a feminist concern in addition to the question of why feminist concerns could be addressed in the context of environmental issues.³

Within the patriarchal set up of society, women, usually are seen and are even required to be working directly with nature, either in the form of working with poultry and livestock, cooking, handling food etc., helping them develop a strong bond with nature. Women are, often, found entering ecological protection and environmental conservation related industries more than men, but unfortunately, there also important positions are usually occupied by men. But women's such close proximity with nature aids them in developing a substantial amount of experience, expertise and knowledge in ecological aspects.⁴

An exquisite example of a movement led by women within the international environmental set up is the Green Belt Movement which was founded in June 1977 by the Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai. She led a group of women to plant seven trees in Wangari Maathai's backyard. This movement fuelled over the years with women continuing to plant trees and by

¹Mary Mellor, *FEMINISM AND ECOLOGY* (1997).

² Karen J. Warren, *ECOFEMINISM: WOMEN, CULTURE, NATURE* (1997).

³ C. Jackson, *Women/Nature or Gender/History? A Critique of Ecofeminist 'Development'*, 20 J.P.S. 409 (1993).

⁴ S. Sharma, *Interweaving Environment, Ecology and Feminism: Ecofeminism as The Means of Environment Conservation* in *ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: EMERGING ISSUES AND THE WAY FORWARD* 244 (Dr. Ranjan Sarkar, ed. 2021).

the year of 2005, almost thirty million trees had been planted by the women participating in the movement.⁵ The Green Belt Movement has now garnered worldwide acclaim as an ecological organization empowering various communities, particularly women, with a view to conserve the ecology and improve their livelihoods. This movement was started as a response to the increasing urgent needs of Kenyan women whose streams were drying up, food supply was doubtful and women had to travel long distances in the procurement of water and fuel.⁶

The Green Belt Movement worked as a saviour for such women by persuading them to work together in growing seedlings and planting trees together so as to bind the soil, ensure storage of rainwater, etc., and also earn themselves a small token money for their efforts and work. The Movement led to the creation of a 'Green Belt' of at the least 1,000 trees around villages in addition to facilitating its participants in assuming charge within their communities.

In the year 1978, Lois Gibbs, an environmentalist in New York, took it upon herself to lead her community in protesting against the establishment of her entire neighbourhood on a toxic dump site. With infants being born with birth defects due to the exposure of pregnant women to the toxins, women suffering from reproductive issues and children developing health concerns due to such toxins, Gibbs led the Love Canal Movement which eventually succeeded in the evacuation and relocation of approximately 900 families by the Government.⁷

Further, in the early 1980s, Ynestra King was instrumental in organizing a peaceful protest at the Pentagon, where women stood holding hands, demanding for equality in their rights (social, reproductive as well as economic rights) in addition to seeking an end to the aggressive governmental actions resulting in the exploitation of not just the community but also of the environment. This Movement came to be known as the 'Women's Pentagon Action.'

The year of 1985 saw the launch of Akwesasne Mother's Milk Project by Katsi Cook. The project was aimed at examining how the increased levels of contaminants and toxins in water body near the Mohawk reservation was adversely affecting the infants. The research revealed that babies, by way of breast milk, were exposed to nearly 200 percent more contaminants than the

⁵African Centre for Technology Studies, *LAND TENURE AND VIOLENT CONFLICT IN KENYA* (2008).

⁶Aneel Salman & Nuzhat Iqbal, *Ecofeminist Movements - the North to the South [with Comments]*, 46 P.D.R. 853 (2007).

⁷Susan A. Mann, *Pioneers of U.S. Ecofeminism and Environmental Justice*, 23 *Feminist Formations* 1 (2011).

kids not on reservation. It brought forth the reality that the toxins pollute water all around the world, however, because of the environmental racism, there are certain marginalized communities that are exposed to greater degrees of such toxins.

Another feather in the ecofeminist historical trajectory is the 'Greening of Harlem Coalition.' Bernadette Cozart, in the year of 1989, founded a coalition with the aim of converting vacant lands into community gardens near and around Harlem. Such a step is not merely an economic win but it also provides an opportunity to the urban communities to stay close to nature and each other. This coalition saw women participating in large numbers, which boosted their confidence in further leading their communities towards a greener and safer environment. A group of African-American women in Detroit have also been working relentlessly in developing city gardens since 1994, calling themselves the 'Gardening Angels.' Urban greening and garden movements are now a popular practice not just in small pockets of countries but even globally.

The most recent person to join the ecofeminist trail is Greta Thunberg whose constant marches have led to the world leaders and its people to sit and take a note against the adverse climatic change.

Eco-feminism came to be identified as a value system, a practice which aided in the political exploration of relations between ecological degradation and androcentrism. The Scientific Revolutions over the years may have, on one hand, kickstarted developmental models but on the other hand it partook a big sacrifice within the natural domains. It replaced nature as a revered protector to nature as a resource machinery that could be controlled and exploited at the whims of men.

III

Ecofeminism and India

We shall now shift our focus on the increasing presence of ecofeminism in India, by way of various social movements as well as transformative litigations. Though knowledge about ecofeminism in India still lies at a nascent stage, there is a greater contribution and leadership shown by women in India, in the context of environment preservation.

The principles underlying eco-feminism too, are now consciously recognised and challenged, especially by the higher judiciary in India. The shackles of systematic oppression and injustice to which women as well as the environment is subjected must be broken. And the first step towards achieving that is recognition of soft discriminating actions shrouding such biased and patriarchal outlook. The power dynamics perpetuating patriarchal beliefs, intertwined with issues of classism, racism, sexism, naturism, i.e. dominion over nature must be countered with feminist rationale.⁸

The Chipko movement in India is considered to be one of the earliest appearances of eco-feminism, dating back to 1974. Though SunderlalBahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt are known as the prominent leaders of the peasant's struggle, the role of Uttarakhand women cannot be overlooked. Their collective show of strength against the timber mafia rampantly destroying their native hills and turning them into wastelands was unique and unprecedented. Local leader Gaura Devi, belonging to Gram Mahila Mandal took upon herself the task of maintaining and preserving forests and ecological balance in the Garhwal- Himalayan region.

The event that took place on 26th March 1974 encompassed fearless village women alongside Gaura Devi carrying out a four-day long vigil on the felling of trees in Reni Village, Hemwalghati, Chamoli district by hugging the trees, thus preventing the contractor of the State Forest Department from felling the trees.

The Appiko Movement in Karnataka was another notable development on similar lines. Appiko, means 'hug' in Kannada. The circumstances leading up to the event is that the government decided to set up hydroelectric forests in Uttar Kannada district. This was to be done by changing the nature of plants that naturally grew in the area with plantations to support the plywood industries. This led to the scarcity of water resources and increased poverty in the region. In September, 1983, PandurangHegde led men, women and children to hug trees in the Kalase forest to prevent them from felling. This also raised awareness about the sensitive ecosystem of the Western Ghats region. The indispensable role of women in this crusade too left an indelible mark as an ecofeminist movement in India.

⁸Karen J. Warren & Jim Cheney, *Ecological Feminism and Ecosystem Ecology*, 6 Hypatia 179 (1991).

C K Janu, belonging to a poor tribal background in Wayanad, Kerala carved her way into becoming one of the strongest tribal woman leaders in the nation. She was influenced by socialist ideology but steered clear of political agendas of leaders.⁹ She fought hard from 2001-2003 and ultimately succeeded in attaining land rights for the tribals who being forest dwellers, were evicted, deprived of their livelihoods and remained uncompensated for rehabilitation. Her 48-hour-sit-in-strike before the Thiruvananthapuram secretariat, and support from tribal brethren led to adverse action from the state authorities. However, relentless efforts made the government give in to the demands she represented. Her emergence as an organic leader, raising the issues of livelihood and survival of the tribals who celebrated her as 'Mother Forest' rightly gives her the title of an ecofeminist.

Ecofeminism as a school of thought has not only gained prominence, but has been the focal point of debates and studies. This formalisation of the ideology in India can be attributed to the esteemed figure, Vandana Shiva. Vandana Shiva has been at the forefront as an ecofeminist academician, propagating the socialist school of thought. Having been a participant in the Chipko Movement of the 1970s, her views on the relationship between women and nature are not just ideological but stem from lived experiences. She is of the opinion that though exploitation of environment is a necessary evil in the capitalist global patriarchal system,¹⁰ women have the ability to maintain partnership with nature owing to their connection and daily interactions. Such women repose great knowledge relating to the environment. However, the patriarchal mindset is bent towards ignorance of these women and hold dismissive outlook towards such knowledge, to the detriment of all mankind.¹¹

Vandana Shiva in 'Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India (1998)' used the term 'maldevelopment' to describe the downsides of imitating Western intensive agriculture in the Third World.¹² She advocates for organic movement through her Navadanya project. Navdanya means 'nine grains' and symbolises the most important grains on which Indian agriculture is based. Navdanya has taken a stride in setting up 54 community seed banks across the nation,

⁹JanuBhaskaran, MOTHER-FOREST: THE UNFINISHED STORY OF C.K. JANU205 (2004).

¹⁰BoroJyoti Prasad &Robidas Mina, *Ecofeminism: A study on Indian Women's Dedication towards the environment*, Anu Books (2015) available at - https://anubooks.com/uploads/session_pdf/16623751683.pdf (last visited Mar. 06, 2023).

¹¹ Id.

¹²Vandana Shiva, STAYING ALIVE: WOMEN, ECOLOGY, AND DEVELOPMENT8 (1989).

trained over 5,00,000 farmers in seed sovereignty, food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture over the past two decades, and helped set up the largest direct marketing, fair trade organic network in the country under its label.¹³

Medha Patkar is a name that needs no introduction. She has relentlessly worked against government policies seizing lands providing subsistence to forest dwellers, without any provision for compensation or rehabilitation. She was the founder and the fiercest of voices in the Narmada Bachao Andolan who mobilised communities and raised awareness about risks of unfettered construction of dams.¹⁴ The powerful mass movement received international attention and support.

Bina Agarwal advocated for inclusive ecological feminism, and thus more in line with environmental justice. Her 'feminist environmental' perspective shows light upon how forests are an important source of livelihood and fuel and fodder of the tribals. The increasing divide between poor and rich is evident from the decline in communal properties for sharing of resources, which also represents the heightened class-gender effect of environmental degradation.¹⁵ This in turn has put immense pressure upon women to collect fuel, fodder, and water. She has challenged the very foundation of government policies, which is the collection of national-level statistics. The bias comprised in the process robs the women of adequate representation and weight in political decisions affecting their legal rights and economic status. Her voice, along with Meera Nanda has been vociferous in urging for greater inclusivity in the policies that would uplift women and the ecosystem on which they depend for their livelihoods.

Vandana Shiva, MedhaPatkar, and Bina Agarwal have been criticized for having a greater focus on urban parts of the nation, and their inability to press for rights surrounding issues in rural backgrounds. Further, there seems to be a generalization of issues and categorizing the same as third-world issues, rather than being region specific. It is the grassroot level action that makes women take up leadership roles rather than adherence to certain ideologies or dogmas. The

¹³Dr. UpmaChaturvedi, *Eco-feminism in India*, 9 IJRSS 1667 (2019).

¹⁴Seema, *Eco-feminism and Environmental Movements in India*, 6 I.J.C.R. 4656(2014).

¹⁵Manisha Rao, *Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: A Review*, 20 DEP 124(2012).

complexity of issues, being intertwined with class and caste differences makes it difficult for such approaches to apply in a straitjacket manner.

Rashida Bee and Champa Devi Shukla have witnessed one of the gravest of all tragedies in the world: the Bhopal Gas leak, which occurred on 2nd December, 1984 in unit owned by Union Carbide (now owned by Dow Chemical Inc.). The leak exposed over 500,000 people to toxic chemicals and had the capacity to affect thousands more.¹⁶ The two women have played a principal role in seeking justice for the affected. They filed a class action suit against the corporation in 1999, organized a 19-day hunger strike in 2002, and even advocated for the provision of long-term healthcare for the survivors of the incident.

Kinkri Devi is a living example of how women's inkling towards nature stems from the very relationship shared between the two. She stood tall against illegal mining and quarrying in the Sirmour district of Himachal Pradesh which consequentially affected the water supply and general ecological balance of the region.¹⁷ Her initiative of filing a Public Interest Litigation in the High Court of Himachal Pradesh which ultimately reached the Supreme Court of India was extraordinary in itself and was representative of how every individual is capable of taking action and protecting nature.

Tulsi Gowda, known as 'Encyclopedia of the Forest' for her immaculate ability to recognise any tree species in the forest was recently awarded the prestigious Padma Shri award. Her life-long efforts of planting more than 30,000 saplings and her service in the state forest department for over sixty years was given due credit and recognition.¹⁸

IV

Ecofeminism and Environmental Justice

¹⁶GowriParameswaran, *A History of Ecofeminist-Socialist Resistance to Eco-crisis in India*, 24 J. Int'l Women Studies 1, 10-11 (2022).

¹⁷Kinkri Devi, *Impoverished Dalit woman who became an unlikely celebrity after campaigning against mining in her home region* (Jan 3, 2008, THE TIMES) available at- <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/kinkri-devi-9219sdgv7mz>. (last visited 2 Feb., 2023).

¹⁸Arathi Menon & Abhishek Chinappa, *Tulsi Gowda: Barefoot Ecologist brings Forest to Life*(Jun. 10, 2021, THE BEACON) available at - <https://www.thebeacon.in/2021/06/10/tulsi-gowda-barefoot-ecologist-brings-forests-to-life/> (last visited 5 Feb., 2023).

Ecological Feminism has transformed and reconceptualized the relationship between nature and women. It acknowledges the significant role of women participating in environmental activism and conservation of nature's irreplaceable attributes in the form of clean air, water and food. It tries to articulate the fact that in this technology driven industrialized era where humans (essentially men) have a mechanistic view of nature, ecological crisis is an inevitable consequence.¹⁹ Men tend to dominate nature by using advanced technologies in pursuance of development, resulting in extreme exploitation of natural resources and degradation of ecology following from it. Unfortunately, the cost of such development is high, robbing the people of their very right to free air, water and food. Such depravation however, mostly happens for the marginalized, powerless persons of the society who are at the receiving end of almost every developmental activity undertaken by a handful of persons.²⁰ Ecofeminists in this regard have adopted an environmental justice ethic which affirms that every person has a right to a decent place to live with clean water and food and where there exists no segregation or oppression.²¹

Environmental justice can be understood as 'fair treatment' as well as 'meaningful involvement' of all persons irrespective of race, colour, nationality or income in the "*development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.*" Historically, the term 'fair treatment' denoted the fact that people with low income, people of colour and tribal communities were the most exposed to environmental degradation. With the progression in society, 'fair treatment' has now come to be linked to physical damages that affected the marginalized sections due to industrialization and heteronormative environmental policies. The movement of Environmental justice has succeeded in bringing to the fore, the working class, people of colour (particularly, women of colour), etc. Environmental justice upholds the rights of all persons to a safe and healthy environment.

Another aspect of environmental justice demands the right of participation as equal partners at every rung of the decision-making ladder encompassing the assessment of needs, planning, execution, enforcement and appraisal. Unfortunately, this aspect of environmental justice is yet to be achieved. Women, for decades, have been closely associated with and have been active

¹⁹ *Supra*, note 7, Susan A. Mann, at 23.

²⁰ Bina Agarwal, *The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons From India*, 18 F.S. 119 (1992).

²¹ Ester Boserup, *Economic Change and the Roles of Women* in PERSISTENT INEQUALITIES (Irene Tinker, ed. 1990).

participants in the preservation of nature and its resources.²² Since the 1970s, the world has witnessed women actively being involved in environmental matters at their own personal level, gradually inspiring others to join them in their fight against natural degradation in the name of development. Sadly, women's role in combating ecological concerns has not yet been effectively acknowledged at the legislative and policy making level. The movements are nourished by women's passion, persistence, stubbornness, resistance and outrage. The stories of 'hysterical housewives' countering 'men of reason' are numerous; however, the recognition and inclusion of women in the upper strata of management and decision making, at par with men, still remains a distant dream.

Even though the prime focus of ecofeminists is the relationship between women and nature, it would not serve right to relegate the perspectives of women on the environment simply to the feminist approach. The impact of participation of women at national and international levels, is to a large extent dependent on their participation in scientific institutions and political organisations in addition to other areas of public life. The authors in this paper are attempting to argue that environmental justice cannot be achieved as long as gendered and ecofeminist analysis of environmental issues is not included within the fabric of environmental protection frameworks. Such ecofeminist analysis commands relevance in light of the fact that ecological degradation is directly linked to the oppressive practices of racism, gender discrimination, etc., and thus becomes an essential intervention within the environmental dialogue and parlance with a view to abate environmental injustice.

IV

Conclusion

This paper underscores the transformative impact of ecofeminism on environmental justice, emphasizing the inseparable link between women and nature. From historical movements to contemporary environmental leaders, women have played a crucial role in shaping ecological discourse and conservation efforts. The case studies from India further illustrate the proactive involvement of women in safeguarding the environment. However, the paper highlights the existing challenges, including the need for greater recognition of women in decision-making

²² Susan Griffin, *WOMEN AND NATURE: THE ROARING INSIDE HER*201 (1978).

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processes and the incorporation of ecofeminist perspectives into environmental policies. Moving forward, acknowledging and addressing the interconnected issues of gender discrimination, racism, and environmental degradation is imperative for achieving holistic environmental justice. Only through a comprehensive and inclusive approach can we pave the way for a sustainable and equitable future.