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THE CONTRIBUTION OF INDIAN WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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Abstract

This historical study delves into the significant contribution of Indian women to environmental sustainability over the years. The research sheds light on the multifaceted roles that women in India have played in fostering ecological balance and sustainability practices. From ancient agricultural practices rooted in harmony with nature to modern grassroots movements, the study uncovers the diverse ways in which Indian women have been instrumental in shaping sustainable environmental practices.

This study explores how women have been at the forefront of conservation efforts, resource management, and community-led initiatives that have contributed significantly to the

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preservation of India's rich biodiversity and this study also addresses challenges faced by Indian women in their pursuit of environmental sustainability, considering societal norms, access to resources, and empowerment issues.

Keywords

Environment sustainability, Indian women, movement, policies.

Introduction

The intricate tapestry of India's history unfolds not only narratives of political and economic transformations but also unveils the often-overlooked stories of women who, through the ages, have been custodians of the environment. In the contemporary discourse on sustainability, the pivotal role played by women in nurturing and preserving the ecological balance stands as a testament to their enduring connection with nature. This research embarks on a historical journey, delving into the multifaceted contributions of women to environmental sustainability in the Indian context.

India, with its rich tapestry of cultures and diverse ecosystems, has a heritage deeply rooted in an intimate relationship with the environment. From ancient times, the Vedic hymns echoing the reverence for nature to the agricultural wisdom embedded in medieval practices, women have been integral to the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. This paper seeks to unravel the threads of history that have woven the narrative of women as environmental stewards, tracing their roles through different epochs, from the ancient civilizations to the present day.

The objectives of this study are twofold. Firstly, it aims to illuminate the historical dimensions of women's involvement in environmental sustainability, shedding light on the diverse ways in which they contributed to the preservation of ecosystems and the harmonious coexistence of communities with their natural surroundings. Secondly, the research aims to scrutinize the cultural and societal influences that have shaped and, at times, constrained

women's roles in environmental practices. By scrutinizing both historical and contemporary perspectives, this paper seeks to bridge the past and present, offering insights into how acknowledging and building upon the historical roles of women can inform current and future environmental sustainability efforts.

As a human we are facing unprecedented environmental challenges, understanding the historical context of women's contributions becomes not just an academic pursuit but a crucial step towards fostering a more inclusive and effective approach to environmental sustainability. By unraveling the rich tapestry of women's roles in shaping India's environmental heritage, we endeavor to illuminate pathways towards a more equitable and resilient future, where the voices and actions of women are integral to the collective endeavor of creating a sustainable and harmonious coexistence with the natural world.

Ancient Wisdom and Vedic Ecological Consciousness:

The roots of India's environmental ethos can be traced back to the ancient texts, where a deep reverence for nature permeated the cultural and spiritual fabric. The ancient people, though didn't study the importance of environment and ecology in books or journals like we do but were well conscious of its basic principles and significance. They believed that the protection of Mother Nature is a moral responsibility of their own and hereby, should essentially preserve nature as much as possible without having a toll on it for the satisfaction of their needs.

The Vedas, the oldest scriptures of Hinduism, echo hymns that celebrate the interconnectedness of all living beings and emphasize the sacred duty of humans to protect the environment. Within this cosmic view, women played pivotal roles in rituals and ceremonies that sought to maintain ecological balance. Goddesses personifying natural elements—earth, water, and forests—were worshipped, highlighting the acknowledgment of the divine feminine in the sustenance of life. The Rig Veda, contains hymns that personify nature as a nurturing mother, establishing an early acknowledgment of the symbiotic relationship between women and the natural world.

According to Ayurveda, various trees, plants and herbs are said to be beneficial in the treatment of incurable diseases, Various fruits and flowers are said to be beneficial for health. In Naturopathy system, incurable diseases are treated by considering pure air, pure water and pure soil as the main basis. The water of rivers like Ganga and Jamuna is considered sacred and emphasis is laid on their conservation.

According to Hindu religious tradition, the tradition of worshipping trees like Peepal, Banyan, Tulsi, Neem etc. and various animals and birds are depicted as vehicles of Gods and Goddesses, which points towards animal love and their protection.

In addition to religious practices, ancient Indian societies valued women's knowledge of herbal medicine and plant lore. Women were the keepers of agricultural wisdom, contributing to sustainable farming practices that maintained soil fertility and biodiversity. The agricultural treatise, 'Krishi Parashara,' credited to the sage Parashara, acknowledges the crucial role of women in managing and nurturing agricultural landscapes.

Significance of Environment Protection in Medieval India:

During India's medieval period, a period dominated primarily by the Mughals and Muslim rulers, agrarian societies flourished, and women's roles in sustaining environmental practices became more pronounced. Women in rural communities were central to agricultural activities, bringing with them a wealth of knowledge about soil fertility, crop rotation, and water management. Their practices were deeply rooted in sustainability, ensuring the long-term productivity of the land.

The medieval era also witnessed the emergence of women-centric guilds and cooperatives, Women played vital roles in the cultivation of crops, the preservation of seeds, and the development of traditional knowledge related to soil fertility and water conservation. Their understanding of the interconnectedness of ecosystems was pivotal in sustaining communities dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods.

Great poet Kalidas, Surdas, Tulsidas, Kabirdas etc in their works they portrayed nature in such a way that its destruction could not even be thought of. Kalidas expressed the idea of environmental protection in Meghdoot and Abhigyan Shakuntalam. Babur's account (Baburnama) gives detailed descriptions of the flora and fauna present in a very systematic manner. It mentions a variety of exotic and endangered animals, birds, trees, etc., which enables us to label him as a keen researcher and a good observer.

Colonial Encounters and Women's Resistance:

The advent of colonial rule in India brought about significant transformations in land use, resource extraction, and the imposition of Western-centric models of development. The British came to India with a mission to trade goods from India, but, after seeing the vast amount of natural resources present here and the plunder of opportunity to exploit the resources, they changed their plans and changed their objectives of exploiting the natural resources. Decided to complete it. The early days of British India saw an abundance of natural resources and after the Mughals, the British played the biggest role in destroying India's natural richness. Because he believed that agriculture and forests were hindrances to the prosperity of his empire.

The exploitation of natural resources for economic gain posed severe challenges to the ecological balance. Women played instrumental roles in movements against deforestation, the commercial exploitation of natural resources.

Post-Independence Period:

The post-independence era saw a continuation of women's roles in environmental sustainability, with an added emphasis on education and awareness. Women became increasingly involved in grassroots movements advocating for sustainable development and the protection of natural resources. Their contributions extended to community-led initiatives, afforestation campaigns, and the promotion of eco-friendly practices.

In the Indian Constitution Article 51(A) contained obliges protection of the environment as a fundamental duty of every citizen as well as a social responsibility.

Major Environmental Movements in India:

In India, particularly after the 1970s, a slew of environmental movements arose. These movements arose from a variety of individual responses to local challenges in various locations at various times. The growth of environmental movements is not limited to one region of the country.

1. The Chipko Movement:

One of the most iconic women-led environmental movements in India, the Chipko Movement, originated in the early 1970s in the state of Uttarakhand. The term ‘Chipko’ translates to ‘hug’ or ‘embrace,’ symbolizing the protesters’ act of hugging trees to prevent their felling. Spearheaded by women from rural communities, the movement was a response to rampant deforestation and the commercial exploitation of forests by logging companies.

The Chipko Movement not only showcased the environmental consciousness of women but also highlighted the direct impact of deforestation on their lives. Women understood that the depletion of forests would not only result in the loss of biodiversity but also adversely affect their primary sources of sustenance, including fuelwood and fodder. Through nonviolent resistance, the women of Chipko brought attention to the need for sustainable and community-oriented forest management practices.

Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt were the leaders of this movement. The most notable feature of this movement was the participation of women.

2. Bishnoi Movement:

In year 1730 A.D. Amrita Devi led this effort, in which 363 people gave their lives for the preservation of their forests. This was the first movement of its sort to establish the concept of hugging or embracing trees for their protection on an ad hoc basis. This moment is popularly known as the Bishnoi movement.

3. Appiko Movement:

One of India’s forest-based environmental movements is the Appiko Movement. The protest took place in the Western Ghats of Karnataka’s Uttara Kannada district. The ‘forest district’ of Karnataka

is Uttar Kannada, which is part of the Western Ghats.

S. L. Bahuguna, the Chipko movement's architect, was requested to gather locals to take an oath to safeguard trees by embracing them. People hugged the trees when the axe-men came down the Kalase forests in September 1983, and the 'Appiko movement' was born. The Appiko movement was successful in achieving its goals of preserving current forest cover, replanting trees on degraded land, and harnessing forest riches while keeping natural resources in mind.

This movement was started in Karnataka under the leadership of Panduranga Hegde for the protection of forests.

4. Narmada Bachao Andolan:

The struggle against the Narmada River Valley Project is India's most well-known environmental movement. The Narmada River Development Project, is one of the world's largest multipurpose water projects. The initiative will improve food production and hydropower generation in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, as well as reshape the valley and the lifestyle of its population

The movement's current leaders, such as Medha Patkar, are seeking to provide adequate rehabilitation programmes for those who have been displaced by the project. Human rights advocates have been the articulators of anti-dam protests as a result of the state's poor implementation of rehabilitation programmes. Their demands included the dam's complete closure, as well as resettlement and rehabilitation benefits for the displaced people.

5. Silent Valley Movement:

The Serene Valley of Kerala is an area of 89 square kilometers which is famous for its dense bio-diversity. In 1980, a dam was proposed here on the Kuntipunj river under a project to generate 200 MW power. The Kerala government was very interested in this project but the voices of scientists, environmental activists and regional people started echoing against this project.

They believed that this was a threat to many special flowers, plants and endangered species of this area. Apart from this, it can cause huge harm to the centuries-old balanced ecology of the Western Ghats.

Under pressure, the government had to declare it a national reserve forest in 1985.

6. Navdanya and Sovereignty:

Initiated by environmentalist and eco-feminist Vandana Shiva in the 1980s, Navdanya is a movement that emphasizes biodiversity conservation, seed sovereignty, and sustainable agriculture. Vandana Shiva's leadership has been instrumental in mobilizing women, particularly in rural areas, to resist the detrimental impacts of industrial agriculture and promote traditional, ecologically sound farming practices.

Women in the Navdanya movement actively participate in seed saving, preserving native crop varieties, and advocating for the rights of small-scale farmers. Recognizing the pivotal role of women as seed keepers, Navdanya has contributed to the preservation of agricultural biodiversity.

7. Mahila Anna Swaraj and Food Sovereignty:

In the 21st century, the Mahila Anna Swaraj (Women's Food Sovereignty) movement has gained prominence, particularly in the context of women's engagement with food security and sustainable agriculture. Women in rural India are increasingly asserting their rights to land, water, and seeds, challenging the dominant narrative of industrial agriculture and genetically modified crops.

This movement emphasizes women's roles as primary agricultural producers, highlighting their knowledge of traditional farming methods that prioritize sustainability over chemical-intensive practices. By advocating for food sovereignty, these women-led movements seek to reclaim control over local food systems, ensuring not only environmental sustainability but also the well-being of communities.

8. Sakhi Mandalas and Sustainable Livelihoods:

Sakhi Mandalas, or women's self-help groups, have become integral to sustainable development initiatives in various regions of India. These groups empower women economically and socially, fostering entrepreneurship and sustainable livelihoods. Many Sakhi

Mandalas focus on eco-friendly practices such as organic farming, handicrafts, and sustainable water management.

By providing women with opportunities for economic independence, these movements contribute to both poverty alleviation and environmental sustainability.

Women's Challenges and Obstacles in Environmental Sustainability:

- Limited Access to resources.
- Educational barriers.
- Societal expectations and gender roles.
- Exclusion for decision making processes.
- Lack of recognition for informal contributions.
- Economic dependence and vulnerability.

Government and NGO Initiatives to Empowering Women for Environmental Sustainability:

The historical narrative of women's roles in environmental sustainability in India has been a tale of resilience and resourcefulness. In recent decades, government bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have recognized the pivotal role that women play in fostering sustainable practices. A plethora of initiatives have been undertaken, aiming to empower women, enhance their environmental knowledge, and amplify their contributions to building a more sustainable future.

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES:

1. National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA):

Enacted in 2005, NREGA guarantees 100 days of wage employment to rural households, with a focus on women's participation. This initiative not only addresses economic empowerment but also enhances women's involvement in activities that contribute to environmental sustainability, such as water conservation, afforestation, and soil conservation. Through NREGA, women in rural areas have been involved in projects that promote ecological resilience while improving livelihoods.

2. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA):

Green Jobs for Women: MGNREGA has been extended to include a “Green Jobs” component, emphasizing environmentally sustainable activities. Women are actively engaged in projects like tree plantation, water conservation, and biodiversity conservation. This initiative acknowledges the dual impact of empowering women economically and promoting environmental sustainability.

3. Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) :

Launched in 2014, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan aims to achieve a clean and open-defecation-free India. Women, especially in rural areas, are at the forefront of this initiative, participating in cleanliness drives, waste management, and the construction of sanitary facilities. The program not only addresses hygiene and sanitation but also fosters a sense of environmental responsibility among women.

4. Van Mahotsav (Tree Plantation) Campaigns:

The annual Van Mahotsav (Tree Plantation) campaigns organized by the government promote afforestation and tree planting across the country. Women’s involvement is actively encouraged, recognizing their historical role in traditional practices related to forestry and herbal medicine. These campaigns contribute not only to environmental conservation but also to the sustainable use of forest resources.

5. Harela festival of Uttarakhand:

Harela festival is a symbol of environmental conservation, happiness and prosperity. From this festival onwards the weather is considered suitable for plantation. For sowing Harela, soil is brought from the same field in which proper planting of plants and good crop can be tested. Seven or five types of grains are sown which indicate favorable soil and weather cycles. Harela festival also symbolizes plantation, soil testing and weather cycles.

NGO INITIATIVES:

1. SEWA (Self Employed Women’s Association):

SEWA has been a pioneering force in empowering women in

the informal sector. Through initiatives like SEWA Bharat, the organization focuses on sustainable livelihoods for women, including organic farming, waste management, and promoting eco-friendly practices. SEWA recognizes the integral connection between women's economic empowerment and environmental sustainability.

2. Greenpeace India - Women Power for Earth Campaign:

Greenpeace India runs campaigns that highlight the role of women as agents of change in environmental conservation. The "Women Power for Earth" campaign emphasizes women's leadership in sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, and climate change adaptation. The organization advocates for policies that recognize and support women's contributions to environmental sustainability.

Suggestions for Enhancing Women's Role in Environmental Sustainability:

The historical study of women's contributions to environmental sustainability in India provides a foundation for contemplating actionable suggestions that can amplify their role in the present and future. Recognizing the intrinsic connection between women and the environment, the following suggestions aim to foster a more inclusive and empowered approach to sustainable development:

- Education and knowledge empowerment
- Economic empowerment
- Inclusive policy framework
- Community engagement and leadership
- Technology innovation and access
- Future challenges and considerations

While envisioning a future where women continue to play a pivotal role in environmental sustainability, it is essential to acknowledge and address the challenges that may impede progress:

- Gender inequality
- Lack of representation
- Socio-cultural barriers
- Climate change vulnerability

In summary, the historical perspective on the role of women in environmental sustainability in India reflects a dynamic and evolving

relationship. From ancient rituals to modern-day movements, women have been agents of change, preserving ecological balance and advocating for sustainable practices. Acknowledging and understanding this historical context is imperative for fostering a more inclusive and effective approach to contemporary environmental challenges.

The historical panorama of women-led movements not only showcase the significance of women as stewards of the environment but also underscore the interconnectedness of environmental sustainability with social justice, economic empowerment, and community well-being. As we reflect on this historical odyssey, it becomes evident that women's contributions are not just a footnote but a vibrant and integral chapter in India's journey towards a more sustainable and equitable future.

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