

**ENVIRONMENTAL
MOVEMENTS AND
MARGINALIZED RURAL
WOMEN: A THEORETICAL
PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

As a social and political doctrine, environmentalism has three components: criticism of contemporary social systems, the expectation of an ideal society, and the search for a path to social transformation. German zoologist Ernst Haeckel first coined the term “ecology” in 1870 to describe the relationship of animal and plant management to the environment. Today the term ecology is not only associated with zoology or biology; apart from this, it is closely associated with various branches of pure science (physics and chemistry) and social sciences, reflecting its interdisciplinary expansion across knowledge systems and policy debates worldwide. Environmental research in all these disciplines has shown that the ideas of conventional economic development and the ideas of modern science and technology are pushing the harmony between nature and society towards destruction, and this is having a negative impact on all living things. Based on such conclusions, environmentalism called for a new attitude to replace the old political and economic development path and alongside the conventional nature-society relationship. The main purpose of my essay is to discuss the various environmental movements that have taken place over the years and the leading role of marginalized rural women in all these movements, their relationship with the environment, their significant steps in environmental development, how their empowerment is linked to this, and what vital role they should play in shaping a sustainable and just future.

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Keywords

Lifeworld, Nature, Deforestation, Environmental Movement, Social Justice

Introduction

Many years ago, people lived by collecting food from the forest, that is, they were hunter-gatherers. Some were good at hunting, some were good at fishing in the rivers, and some were engaged in crop production and collecting fruits and roots in the forests. During this period, people had developed an agricultural-based life structure. But the discovery of metals, namely the Copper Age, the Bronze Age, and finally the Iron Age, and the discovery of various production machinery initiated an unimaginable change in the contemporary economy. The industrialization process and its accompanying massive and uncontrolled production exposed the most naked form of destruction of natural resources. Since the sixties of the twentieth century, movements have been taking place in various countries, especially developing or underdeveloped countries, to protect the environment, which can be included in the new social movements.

The continuous increase in population, unprecedented technological development is continuously putting pressure on the environment and natural resources. As a result of unplanned urbanization, industrialization, deforestation, the amount of various natural resources such as water, land, energy, etc. is decreasing abnormally. And whenever natural disasters occur, the ecological people, especially the marginalized women of rural areas, are the ones who suffer the most. They are called ecological people who are closely connected with the natural environment of their local area to meet their daily needs (Gadgil and Guha, 1995, p.3). These marginalized women in the villages are also directly involved in the resources obtained from this natural environment to meet their daily needs. Therefore, it is very natural that the ill effects of environmental pollution fall directly on them first.

Research Objectives

The main objectives of my research are-

- To discuss the various environmental movements that have taken place over the years and the leading role of marginalized rural women in all these movements.
- To discuss the relationship between women and environment.
- To discuss how their empowerment is linked to this and what role they should play overall in the future.

Research Methodology

This research work is based on content analysis method. The content analysis method is a very effective way of research in socio-political analysis. This research method has been applied to examine the role of marginalized rural women in the environmental movement.

Theoretical Background

'We are living in a social movement society' (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998). But sociologists do not agree on the definition of what a social movement is. Therefore, we will try to understand what a social movement means, without citing what any sociologist has said, in a general way. In general, a social movement refers to the joint organized efforts of a large number of people in a democratic manner with the aim of changing some major or fundamental aspects of society or achieving social justice. However, all social movements start from Grievance; but not all complaints lead to social movements, if that complaint has a concrete basis and if the recognition of identity is associated with it and there is a specific purpose, then a social movement is organized. Therefore, someone rightly said that 'The relationship between grievances, identities and movements is one of mutual cause and effect.' (Guidry, 1992). The essential conditions for a social movement are minimum organization, suitable leadership, and the will and active participation of the members to take the movement forward - which in a word is the driving force of a social movement. Social movement certainly plays a supporting role in social change. But social movement and social change are not synonymous, social change has been going on since ancient times, changeability is the characteristic of society. Therefore, social change does not only occur through social movements, but also through other elements. Social movements are basically organized with the aim of consciously building a better social system. Therefore, every social movement has a history of birth, development, and death or end. Since social movement is a kind of joint organized effort, in many cases social movement and collective behavior are considered to be supportive, but in reality they are never the same. Because collective behavior is chaotic and random, examples of which are riots, craze, etc. On the other hand, social movements are purposeful and organized and directed towards specific goals, for example, environmental protection, women's rights, etc. New social movements are basically a concept related to the European 'Continental Philosophy' tradition. The main focus of new social movements is the 'Post Industrial Society'. New social

movements have emerged in the context of this social system – which has endowed them with a distinct character; from the social movements organized in the previous Industrial Society. In general, an industrial society refers to a social system where the product-based economy has changed to a service-based economy. In an industrial society, there are ‘workers’ to produce goods, but that worker is not a ‘worker’ like in an industrialized society, his character has changed. This worker is much more technology-based, and through professionalism, he advances the capitalist product-centered market system. As a result of the unprecedented development of the communication system, the state and bureaucracy have brought about a change in the mindset and values of the individual through the use of information technology. For this reason, in a larger context, new social movements want to emphasize the Role of Culture, opposing the capitalist product-centered market system and its supporting bureaucratic system. On the other hand, on a small scale, new social movements want to give importance to various regionally-focused issues. Therefore, researchers of new social movements give importance to various issues related to identity - environmental movements, urban social movements, homosexual movements, pacifist movements, women's liberation movements, cultural struggles, which are actually related to student and youth movements.

In this regard, an important word is Lifeworld. The word 'Lifeworld' originates from the French word 'Lebenswelt' which was first used by the eminent Phenomenological philosopher Husserl. Habermas himself also acknowledged Husserl's words on this matter (The Theory of Communicative Action Vol-2, p-119). According to Husserl, what is captured in our experience, more specifically, the search for subject-oriented consciousness, the previous experience of science about the world. Habermas has used this idea in the field of informal way of life of the individual, capitalist market system, administrative structure, etc. Habermas developed the idea of 'Lifeworld' on the basis of the relationship between experience, language and science as a means of communicative action. He shows that it is true that science and modernity are closely related to each other; but no modernity is society-neutral, it is associated with a special type of social system. Which he calls capitalist modernity. This capitalist modernity has broken the individual's own world or Lifeworld customs, values - this relationship has become contradictory. New social movements are organized to escape this situation and protect the 'Lifeworld'.

It is necessary to discuss a theoretical aspect of this work. In this case, the most relevant theory of social movements is the ‘Poor

Peoples Movement Theory', which was presented by the American political scientist Francis Fox Piven and the sociologist Richard A. Cloward in their famous book 'Poor People's Movement Why They Succeed, How They Fail' (1977). However, by 'Poor People' they did not mean workers employed in industrial factories or any group of poverty. In the context of the United States, in some cases, white people, in some cases, black women, migrant refugee agricultural workers from the South of the United States, and some migrant urban workers who originally participated in social movements at different times were called 'Poor People' (Piven and Cloward, 1977). In this book, they have tried to show why the 'Poor Peoples' movements succeed and why they fail, by analyzing four movements in the context of the United States from the Great Depression of the 1930s to the post-World War II period, namely the unemployment movement, the industrial workers' movement, the civil rights movement, and the welfare rights movement. They show in their research that rapid and institutional change leads to social chaos and in this situation, the 'Poor Peoples' organize social movements through their grievances. These 'Poor Peoples' or the workplace and the wages they receive from it are not very conscious, as much as they become vocal against it and organize movements when they are deprived of housing, education rights, etc.

Women and Nature

In Indian philosophy, women are compared to 'nature'. They create and nurture. They are compared to 'power', the power that controls this process of creation and development. If we think of nature management in an international context, who do we find at the forefront of protecting the environment and natural resources? The answer is very simple: women; especially those women who live in villages or remote hilly areas, with whom nature is very close. According to Vandana Shiva, "Women have a deep connection with nature based on the experience of creating new life. Just as they (women) believe that their bodies can give birth to new life, they also believe that nature also has that power" (Shiva, 1989, p.43).

Although all women have a close relationship with nature, the rural context is more intimate than that of urban areas. They live much closer to nature than men and this closeness has made them the ultimate protectors of the natural ecosystem. For them, the forest is like their own mother's home. They are completely dependent on their local natural environment, that forest, for meeting their daily needs. They cannot imagine living without the

shade of the surrounding green forest, the diverse ecosystem, the chirping of birds. They have to collect fuel, food, fodder for domestic animals, etc., and the source of this is the forest. There is no reason to think that just because they collect fuel, they are destroying the forest. Women usually collect dry branches and leaves of trees, and their work does not harm the trees.

Village women also do the work of collecting drinking water. Especially in a country like India, collecting water is their only job. They are aware of where to go to get good water. They play a key role in preserving even good water sources (Rodda, 1991, p.51). That is why when a tube well breaks down in a village, they are the ones who suffer the most, because they do not know how to repair a tube well. As a result, they have to carry water from a source far away with great difficulty. Swedish feminist and nature-loving writer Elin Wagner, in her famous book *Alarm Clock* published in 1941, highlighted the deep relationship between women and nature. Wagner's aim was to make women aware (alarming) about the way plants and animals are being used like machines in the mechanized production system. According to her, the indiscriminate misuse of resources is polluting the environment. She compared the dominance of men over women with the dominance of men over the environment; therefore, she highlighted the relationship between the liberation of women and the liberation of the earth and nature (Peterson and Merchant, 1986).

This debate has been further advanced by American marine zoologist Rachel Louise Carson. In his famous book *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, he shows how war and toxic pesticides have brought destruction. According to him, soldiers rain bullets to destroy the enemy; and farmers rain pesticides to destroy the enemies (insects) of their fields. He called these pesticides biocides, because the effect of these pesticides is not limited to destroying biodiversity by destroying those insects, but its effect is much wider. He talks about DDT (Dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane) for example. He called this DDT the elixir of death. According to him, in this toxic world, birds will no longer sing in spring. This DDT not only damages the ecosystem, it also causes various deadly diseases in the human body. Farmers and people associated with agriculture come into direct contact with this pesticide when they mix it with water with their bare hands and spread it on the land. Marginal women of the village participate more in agricultural work in the village. And as a result, they are suffering severely physically. Carson has asked women to take the initiative to restore that old tradition to save

nature from the horrors of this machine civilization (Peterson and Merchant, 1986).

In the 1970s, intellectual practice began on the close relationship of women with nature, especially when Esther Boserup's (1970) book "Woman's Role in Economic Development" was published. While reviewing the agricultural system of Africa, she showed that the work of food production among various tribes of Africa is mainly done by women. In addition, at the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, the prominent Indian physicist and nature lover Vandana Shiva brought the issue of the relationship between women and the environment to the public. Forest resources are not infinite but severely limited.

Some important environmental movements

To highlight the nature-consciousness of women and the active role of women in the environmental movement, let us go back to 1731 in the village of Khejarali in Jodhpur district of Rajasthan, where Amrita Bai sacrificed her life to protect the village trees. She is called the founder of the modern Chipko movement. When the sepoys came to Khejarali village to cut trees on the orders of the Maharaja of Jodhpur, first Amrita Bai and later many villagers came forward after seeing her. More than a hundred people died in this movement. In the end, the Maharaja was forced to withdraw his order after facing strong resistance from the villagers.

A similar movement to the movement started by Amrita Bai in 1731 was started in Uttar Pradesh in 1973 by Bachni Devi, Gauri Devi, Sudei Devi and others. In the pages of history, it is known as the Chipko movement. This movement began in 1973 in Gopeshwar village of Chamoli district of Uttar Pradesh against the indiscriminate cutting of trees by a sports equipment company. When the government's forest department allowed some traders and contractors to cut trees, the local tribal people of the area, seeing no way to protect the tree resources, started a movement in an innovative way under the leadership of Dasoli Gram SwarajMandal to save the forest. The concerned hill people, especially women, succeeded in stopping the cutting of trees by hugging the trees (Guha,2000, p.115-119).

The Chipko movement was initially more a conflict between the desire for profit and survival than a movement for forest protection. We have already discussed that women in rural hill areas depend on the forest for their livelihood. In an agrarian economy, the ill effects of forest destruction and environmental

degradation primarily fall on women. Because they are closely connected to nature. There was a song in the mouth of the women of this region about this movement that said "The land is mine, the water is mine, this forest is ours, our ancestors created it, we will protect it..." Under pressure, the government banned the felling of trees in that region and declared a vast area as a protected forest. Moreover, the central government ordered a ban on felling of trees for 15 years in 1980.

In the context of the Chipko movement, the government's decision created a new problem. By declaring the forest as a protected area, not only the businessmen and contractors but also the local indigenous people lost the right to use the forest. However, the forest is closely related to the livelihood of these local indigenous people, especially the women of that region. Falling into the trap of government rules and bureaucracy, their livelihood became uncertain. As a result of this violation of their natural rights, the women of that region started a tree felling movement in the 1990s, which was the opposite of the Chipko movement. But this movement of the women of that region can never be called an anti-environmental movement. This movement was a movement to survive by using the environment properly. Where else would people get their livelihood from except the environment? This was the main objective of the tree cutting movement.

The movement to save the forest of the tribal women of Asna village in Bastar district of Kerala is known as Asna Movement (1987). Asna village is a small village surrounded by forest. Although the local forest was protected by the government, influential people used to cut wood and sell it to the tribal people at high prices. In such a situation, the forest department again announced that all the trees currently in the forest would be cut down and new forests would be created. For this purpose, the forest department started the work of enclosing the entire forest with wire fences. As a result, the tribal women in that area were losing whatever opportunity they could have used the forest.

A group of 30-40 tribal women led by Mikti Bai, a tribal woman from the village, appealed to the village Kotwar (inspector), Patel (tax collector) and Sarpanch (head) to take up the issue of the tribal women with the government and stop the forest department from taking this step. But they did not assure any help to the tribal women. Then the women decided that they would have to do something about it. They contacted Iqbal, an official of a local NGO (Adivasi Harijan Kalyan Samiti). On Iqbal's advice, they started an active movement by breaking the wire fence and driving away the forest workers.

The administration kept pressuring the men, saying that if they did not stop their wives and daughters from this movement, the government would be forced to arrest them. As a result, unrest started between husbands and wives in every house. But despite this, the women did not give up. After this, about 2000 tribal women submitted a memorandum to the district collector. In it, they demanded that the government should not cut down a single tree and that this fence should be completely removed. Permission should be given to collect firewood from this forest and their domestic animals should be allowed to roam. They are opposing afforestation. But the forest should not be fenced, because they use that forest for their livelihood. Ultimately, all their efforts were successful. The government accepted their demand. Since then, the women have been protecting this forest' (Kalland and Pearsoon, 1998).

Recently, in 2009, a new movement similar to the Chipko movement was born in Sirmaur district of Himachal Pradesh by the marginalized women of that region. The central government decided to build the Renuka Dam on the Yamuna river in Sirmaur district to supply drinking water to the city of Delhi and generate hydroelectricity. However, to quench the thirst of Delhi, about 700 hectares of forest land will have to be destroyed and about 1000 families will be affected as a result. In this context, local women started a movement in a novel way to save the forest. They compared the tree to their brother and started tying rakhis on the tree. They claimed that they would not let their brother (tree) be killed as long as they lived. Considering all the aspects, the National Green Tribunal has recently issued a stay order on this project.

Another important environmental movement in the history where women have played a very important role is the Green Belt movement in Kenya. Nobel laureate WangaraMaathai launched this movement on World Environment Day in 1977. The main objective of this movement was to prevent the massive deforestation in Kenya and to empower rural women to make decisions about environmental conservation. In addition, it was a movement to transfer technology from expats to the common people. Village women were involved in the work of forest creation in a planned manner with the help of advanced technology. Through this movement, about 30 million trees were planted by 2005 (Guha, 2000, pp.102-104). Through this program, the important steps taken by the women of that region caught the attention of the whole world.

In Kenya, in the 1980s, Kenyan women began a movement against large foreign corporate companies. The biggest problem in that country was that foreign companies controlled the country's agriculture. Instead of growing food crops, women in most parts of the country were forced by their husbands and the government to grow coffee for the benefit of foreigners. They not only fought against these foreign companies, but also spoke out against the tyranny of this male society. They continued this movement for several decades. In the end, the movement lasted until a democratic government was established in Kenya and this democratic government was able to solve such problems to some extent through land reform.

Conclusion

Currently, marginalized women in villages are not only struggling against this alarming trend of the world, but they have also joined hands to change it. Through the formation of various domestic or international non-governmental organizations, many women have not only tried to show the world that they have the right to participate in resolving this critical situation of the environment, but they have also tried to show their unique relationship with the environment, that is, their unique needs, responsibilities and their correct understanding of natural resources. The importance of the positive role played by marginalized women in movements such as Chipko movement, Asana movement, Green Belt movement etc. is multifaceted. The issue of women's empowerment is also involved with this. If we look at it carefully, we will see that all these movements were mainly against men. Through these movements, they have not only saved the environment, but through them they have snatched their just rights from men.

The suffering of women due to environmental pollution, deforestation, overpopulation, etc. is very different from that of men. Researchers at the United Nation Chronicle have found a link between DDT and Breast Cancer. In addition, the World Health Organization has found that women who come into contact with pesticides without covering their hands and face are at high risk of miscarriage. Such serious health problems make women more responsible for the environment.

Mothers have an important role to play in this. It is said that mothers are the first educators of children. They play an important role in shaping the personality of the child. If the initial problem can be solved in any way, then the problem becomes much easier to solve. Mothers will teach their children in such a way that a sense of respect for the environment and the values of

biodiversity is awakened in their children from the very beginning. It is necessary to teach them to love nature, not to destroy seedlings unnecessarily, to encourage planting trees, not to litter everywhere, etc., from childhood. Until our thinking and values change, no matter how many national or international conferences are held, it will never be possible to eradicate this cancer-like disease.

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