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**BODIES, DIVERSITY, AND BIODIVERSITY: EXPLORING FEMINIST  
ECOLOGIES IN SOUTH ASIA**

Nandini Sardana

Step By Step School Noida

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**ABSTRACT**

Literature and research are clear that there is a clear correlation and intersection between gender and the environment. Environmental destruction and climate change disproportionately affect women, especially rural women and poorer women. Women undertake a larger proportion of agricultural work and other laborious tasks as well as care labour. However, their contributions are often missing from the narratives of environmental movements. Ecofeminism arose as an ideology to counteract the patriarchal systems of oppression that have ignored the gendered effects of environmental destruction. It has led to several prominent movements and successful examples of women's participation. However, critiques of ecofeminism have raised essential questions about its homogenization of women and lack of intersectionality. This paper examines the theoretical foundations of ecofeminism, and critically examines its evolution over the past decades with a particular focus on South Asia and India. This paper argues that while ecofeminism retains relevance today, it is crucial for intersectional policy measures to come to the fore, to account for the differences in women's lived experiences in the South Asian region. The paper will pose policy recommendations and theoretical routes to improve an intersectional understanding and better practical implementation.

**Introduction**

Issues pertaining to climate change and global warming are of paramount importance globally. Issues of climate related adversities, shortage of natural resources and conservation are especially relevant in the Global South, due to the presence of developing, middle income and low income countries. In South Asia especially, due to the large population, there is a need to place a high priority on these issues. In response to these trends, ecofeminism has emerged as an ideology and strategy across the world. Ecofeminism emerged in the West as a product of the peace, feminist and ecology movements of the late 1970s and the early 1980s (Rao, 2012). The basic tenets of ecofeminism are to uncover the relation between the destruction of natural

resources, biodiversity and resulting consequences and patriarchal domination and violence against women, the colonized non-western, non-White peoples and nature. Ecofeminism is hinged on the foundation that the liberation of women cannot be achieved in isolation from the larger struggle for preserving nature and life on this earth (Rao, 2012).

While interpreted in different ways globally, ecofeminism has resulted in grassroots movements especially in South Asian countries and India, in large part due to the particular experiences of women in these regions, dependence on natural resources, and the patriarchal division of labour which results in women facing most of the adverse consequences in climate related conditions such as droughts and famines. In South Asian nations, it is women and female children who do much of the gathering and fetching of forest produce, especially fuelwood and other non timber products (Agarwal, 1998). It is poor rural women (and female children) living in environmentally vulnerable regions—such as arid and semiarid zones—who are, therefore, the most affected by the ill-effects of environmental decline (Agarwal, 1998). Given these circumstances, there is a dire need for environmental ideologies and modes of conservation to consider gender specific effects which have been experienced in varying degrees in South Asia and across the world. Especially in countries like India, adopting an intersectional approach is crucial to ensure that the most underserved are prioritised in the ideologies of conservation and ecofeminism in a culturally sensitive manner.

This paper will examine the background and theoretical underpinnings of ecofeminism and its correlation with ecological and feminist movements in India and globally. The paper will then critically analyze methods and ideologies of conservation and advocate the need for intersectionality and better practical implementation. The paper will conclude with policy recommendations on reconciling the theory of gender and conservation with praxis.

## **Background**

Some of the most prominent women's empowerment movements in India are correlated with ecological movements like the Chipko Movement in the Gharwal Himalayas in the 1970s, and the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The Chipko movement has been touted as the movement which marked a watershed movement for ecofeminism in India. The movement arose as a protest to the forests to commercial timber operators, while the local people were refused access to the forests for making agricultural implements (Rao, 2012). The movement which spread rapidly to other villages saw the active involvement of women. They worked jointly with the men of their community, and in some cases even against them, when they differed with them over the use of forest resources (Rao, 2012). Over the decades, there have also been several local land and resource related conflicts other than the well known movements, which have seen women at the

helm. However, in the reporting and retelling of these stories, it is a pertinent critique of the ecofeminist movement that women have been sidelined from these narratives despite their participation and being the most adversely hit parties (Rao, 2012).

The Chipko movement and Narmada Bachao Andolan drove women's participation across the world, such as the Green Belt movement in Kenya. Over time, the ecofeminist movement has taken different conceptual shapes and directions. Over the last decade, it has devolved in several different manifestations, key among them being radical and cultural ecofeminism. The latter focuses on how ecological problems tend to affect women more than men and on the premise that women have a more sustainable relationship with nature, which is reciprocal rather than exploitative (Ghanta, 2021; Singh, 2019). This approach then argues that women contribute to the preservation of nature rather than just exploit its resources. Scholars such as Bina Agarwal and Vandana Shiva have been advocates for this approach (Singh, 2019). In India, it is especially relevant given that it is women farmers who produce around 60 to 80 percent of the country's food and 90 percent of dairy products (Hindu Business Line, 2013). However, only 13 percent have property rights and consequently since women are deprived of land rights, they also face the threat of eviction from marital home as well as violence (Hindu Business Line, 2013).

Ecofeminist scholars in the Global South challenge the dominant ideologies of Western ecofeminism on the grounds that it does not account for the experiences of women of colour, poorer women, and women in low income countries who face a variety of different on ground impediments, calling for a far more intersectional approach to conservation (Jabeen, 2016). Postcolonial ecofeminists demand that the material conditions of the (post)colonized men and women also be considered, which adds another layer to the causes of environmental oppression. It asserts that the internalized patriarchal ideology is not the only cause of twin domination of women and nature. Other strands of thinking have developed as well, such as socialist ecofeminism. While this may raise certain theoretical contradictions and inconsistencies, the fundamental bedrock of ecofeminism which has manifested in different ways across the world and analyzes the interconnection of the oppression of women and nature (Jabeen, 2016). The following section of this paper will further interrogate the theories, and examine the need for considering intersectional approaches.

## **Discussion**

United Nations studies in the Asia Pacific region have shown that Country-specific evidence reinforces how empowering women in local decision making over the conservation of forests and fisheries leads to better resource efficiency and conservation (UNESCAP, 2017). In India, women-led networks and a history of women's participation, especially when women are seated

on forest councils or attain leadership positions, is highly correlated with less disruptive conflict (Price, 2018). Examples include the Adivasi Adhikar Samiti movement, women led homestay networks in the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserves, the Navdanya movement, among others. Similar examples of networks have been observed elsewhere in South Asia, in Myanmar, Bangladesh and Pakistan (Price, 2018). Studies in South Asia have found that women have developed rich knowledge systems ensuring nutrition security during lean months through both agriculture and other edible resources in the wild, and they lend to each other on general reciprocity and help each other more than men beyond caste and class barriers (Price, 2018).

Therefore, by investing more in gender focused policy measures and enabling women to capitalize in their knowledge to develop conservation strategy is the true way forward for intersectional ecofeminism to thrive (UNESCAP, 2017). Women's organizations in South Asia have played a critical role in negotiating with the State and the community for more gender-just property laws and greater access to economic resources, which lends to the argument that women must be enabled with more economic and bargaining power (Agarwal, 1998).

Therefore, while there is a clear correlation between gender and conservation, the importance of considering this intersection in future policy/efforts must include intersectionality. Different strands of ecofeminism critique the theoretical foundations of the other. However, it is important to move beyond theory and understand the lived realities of women in practice, especially in regions like South Asia. Women themselves have differing relations with each other based on caste, class, race, and other factors. The key argument of intersectional ecofeminists is that these relations must be interrogated, including the effects of colonization in which Western women benefitted far more than women in the Global South (Jabeen, 2016; Singh, 2019; Rao, 2012). The foundations of ecofeminist policy and environmental policy in general must move beyond the vulnerability of women due to climate change and inequity, which tends to put women themselves as a homogenous group. The simple view of women as a homogenous group is shifting toward a more complex view of identities within gender. Multiple social, economic, and cultural characteristics interact with gender in influencing power inequities and explaining how and why people face and manage climate change and environmental stresses in different ways (Price, 2018).

By viewing identity in an intersectional manner, policy can move away from enabling the participation of women which tends to still subjugate them, to actually relying upon the greater knowledge of women due to their engagement with agriculture and natural resources, especially in India and South Asia (UNESCAP, 2017). An intersectional approach goes a long way to recognizing the vital contributions of women and preventing them from being missed in narratives. Protest movements against environmental destruction and struggles for survival

highlight the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply enmeshed in it (Rao, 2012). It is the poor, lower class and lower caste, and within them, the peasant and tribal women, who are worst affected and hence, they are the most active in the protests and possess the most knowledge on indigenous methods for environmental conservation. Women, therefore, cannot be homogenized into the category either within South Asia or across the globe (Rao, 2012; Agarwal, 1998; Price, 2018).

There is significant room for improvement in the involvement of women in structural decision making processes, moving beyond protest movements and ecofeminist commentary. Ecofeminist research cannot successfully be completed while primarily referring only to the socially constructed category of gender because doing so does not demonstrate sensitivity to the potential complexity of issues involved or reflect the multitude of inter-connecting factors which influence the outcomes (Kings, 2017). Failure to incorporate other factors such as caste, class, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality into ecofeminist analysis by focusing solely on gender will severely limit the ability of researchers to interpret actions and offer practical and informative critique on the nature of oppression experienced by women in relation to nature (Kings, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

It is clear from evidence and multiple studies conducted across South Asia that there is a clear correlation between gender and conservation, due to women bearing the brunt of the adverse effects of climate change (Price, 2018). This is perpetuated by a lack of bargaining power, land rights, financial independence, low access to health and education, and risk of sexual harassment, among a myriad of other issues facing women in the region (UNESCAP, 2017; Price, 2018). In order to alleviate structural biases, it is crucial for more studies and data to be gathered on the lived experiences of women – not only by looking at the effect of environmental damage in relation to their care work and labour, but also by expanding the scope of inquiry to all the larger ways it affects women throughout their lives.

While ecofeminism has made strides over the last decades both theoretically and manifested through women's movements and organizations, it has lacked in implementing an intersectional approach in practice. This is due to the tendency to club all women into a homogenous category and focus on their vulnerability rather than their knowledge and experience. Gender mainstreaming in environmental policy will necessarily have to include fostering women's leadership rather than mere participation, recognizing their unpaid work, their knowledge of natural resources, and drawing from successful examples. In spite of research clearly demonstrating the increased vulnerability of women to environmental threats and the economic, social, and political barriers, preventing women from being involved in decision-making

processes, much environmental and climate research remains ignorant to issues of gender, class, race, caste, and sexuality (Kings, 2017).

Recognizing unequal experiences within categories of women, and prioritizing development, funding, dissemination and adoption of gender responsive policy and technology will be the way forward for the future of intersectional ecofeminism (Kings, 2017; UNESCAP, 2017). While there are differing strands of ecofeminism, a desirable direction in the South Asian context will be to focus on evidence-based policy, collection of data, and working with local communities of women at the grassroots level to truly understand their experiences rather than dictate their participation.

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