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Voices Of The Earth: Gandhian Women Environmentalists And The Ethics Of Care

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Abstract: In villages, forests, riverbanks and scores of hidden places across the country, numerous women have risen quietly, but powerfully, to guard over the Earth. Living the values of Mahatma Gandhi through nonviolence, simplicity, and self-sufficiency, these women are leading with love, courage, and profound ecological insight. This essay focuses on such Gandhian women environmentalists those who speak not just for their communities but for tegai, water and future generations. In a sense rooted in an ethics of care, their eco-activism is profoundly personal, derived from interactions with the natural world on a daily basis, and evolved from existential struggles for life. In movements such as Chipko, Narmada Bachao Andolan, and anti-mining protests in forested areas in their habitats, they are confronting structures of exploitation and propounding an alternative for social and economic growth that is premised on harmony rather than dominance. This paper investigates how their practices evoke Gandhi's influence in a very real way, while also making visible what their voices bring that is so pertinent to the ecology of India, yet so frequently ignored. These women remind us that the making of new things, indeed, the making of a new, new world will hinge on care for the earth, each other, the generations to come and those long past to come

Keywords: Gandhian environmentalism, eco-feminism, women environmentalists, ethics of care, grassroots movements, nonviolence

Introduction

At a time when ecological breakdown, climate change, and unsustainable development continue to accelerate, it is often the voices from the margins that offer the most grounded and hopeful visions for the future. In India, women have long taken on the role of guardians of nature protecting forests, rivers, hills, and farmlands with quiet strength and persistent care. Their resistance is not rooted in confrontation, but in compassion, responsibility, and a deep commitment to nonviolence. Their environmental actions grow from their close relationship with the land, shaped by daily life and survival.

This article focuses on the lives and contributions of Gandhian women environmentalists who embody Gandhian ecological ethics not in theory, but through their choices, actions, and community leadership. Gandhi's ideals *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *swaraj* (self-rule), trusteeship, and simplicity stood in sharp contrast to the industrial model of progress. He proposed a way of living grounded in restraint, balance, and a spiritual connection to the Earth. For many rural and indigenous women, these values are not abstract philosophies but principles woven into the fabric of everyday life.

This work can be better understood through the lens of ecofeminism. It shows how women's environmental actions stem from both resistance and care by connecting the exploitation of nature with their marginalization. Their activism is largely guided by the ethic of care, which values relationships, community connections, and interdependence, and provides a useful counterpoint to violent development.

This article demonstrates how women who are grounded in Gandhian philosophy have transformed India's environmental movements by focusing on significant movements such as Chipko, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and Navdanya. Their experiences serve as a reminder that environmental and gender justice must go hand in hand, and that the future of the planet may depend on at last heeding the counsel of those who have long cared for and defended it.

Gandhian Environmental Philosophy

Mahatma Gandhi's environmental awareness was deeply embedded in his broader ethical and spiritual philosophy, which emphasized *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *satyagraha* (truth-force), *swaraj* (self-rule), *sarvodaya* (welfare for all), trusteeship, and *aparigraha* (non-possession). While Gandhi never identified as an environmentalist in the modern sense, many of his principles resonate strongly with contemporary ideas of sustainability and ecofeminism.

➤ *Ahimsa and Non-Possession*

Gandhi expanded the concept of nonviolence to encompass all life forms, arguing that harming nature is itself a form of violence (Nayeck, 2014; Willey, 1997). His often-quoted statement—"Nature has everything for human beings' needs, not for their greed" (Mulia, 2023, p. 1)—captures the ethical imperative to live within ecological limits. He advocated *aparigraha*, the practice of limiting one's possessions to only what is necessary, viewing overconsumption as morally equivalent to theft. This ethical stance anticipated the principles of modern sustainability (Nayeck, 2014; Mulia, 2023).

➤ *Satyagraha as an Ecological Ethic*

Although *satyagraha* originally emerged as a tool for nonviolent political resistance, Gandhi also envisioned it as a way of life rooted in truth and harmony—with both society and nature (Mulia, 2023; MKGandhi.org, n.d.). He believed that just as unethical means could not produce ethical ends in politics, exploitative actions toward nature undermined moral and spiritual well-being (MKGandhi.org, n.d.).

➤ *Swaraj, Sarvodaya, and Trusteeship*

Gandhi's concepts of *swaraj* and *sarvodaya* promoted decentralized governance and equitable well-being for all—human and non-human alike (Mulia, 2023; Willey, 1997). He believed that village-level self-reliance could foster ecologically sustainable living (Mulia, 2023). His idea of trusteeship emphasized the moral responsibility of those with wealth or resources to use them for the collective good (Gandhi, 1960/2005), a concept that aligns closely with environmental justice principles.

➤ *A Vision Ahead of Its Time*

Although Gandhi did not use the language of environmental science, his philosophy anticipated many of today's ecological concerns. Scholars have noted that his worldview offers an early critique of industrial excess and consumerism. As Guha (2013) argues, Gandhi "anticipated the environmental crisis that humanity finds itself in today," and his thought has influenced both Indian and global environmental movements. His belief that "the earth has enough to satisfy everyone's needs but not everyone's greed" remains a powerful reminder of the ethical limits to growth (Guha, 2013; Lal, n.d.).

➤ *Relevance in the Contemporary World*

Gandhi's holistic vision—where humanity, society, and the environment are viewed as interconnected—resonates strongly with today's global challenges. His emphasis on ethical, small-scale, and decentralized development aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Haaland & Rein, 2021; Mulia, 2023). His thought continues to serve as a moral compass for those seeking climate solutions, environmental justice, and sustainable community-based alternatives.

Ecofeminism and the Ethics of Care

Ecofeminism, both as a theoretical approach and an activist practice, draws a vital connection between the exploitation of women and the degradation of the natural world, identifying their shared roots in patriarchal systems (**International Journal of English and Studies, 2023**). At its heart, ecofeminism critiques the colonial-capitalist models of development and male-dominated power structures, while advocating for alternative paradigms grounded in relational ethics and ecological justice.

➤ *Ecofeminism in India: Vandana Shiva and the Chipko Movement*

In the Indian context, Vandana Shiva stands out as a leading ecofeminist thinker. She challenges modern development frameworks that systematically marginalize women's ecological knowledge and traditional environmental roles. According to Shiva, women in subsistence-based communities have cultivated a deep, intimate understanding of nature—knowledge that is often dismissed or devalued by capitalist-patriarchal systems (**Infibnet, n.d.; International Journal of English and Studies, 2023**). In her co-authored work *Ecofeminism* (1993) with Maria Mies, she argues that women's resistance to ecological degradation is intrinsically connected to their struggle against patriarchal and capitalist oppression (**Suresh, 2021**). One of the most powerful illustrations of this is the Chipko Movement, which they interpret as a grassroots ecofeminist expression, grounded in principles of interdependence, subsistence, and nonviolent resistance.

➤ *The Ethics of Care: Women and Relational Stewardship*

Central to ecofeminist thought is the ethics of care—a framework that emphasizes empathy, relational responsibility, and a nurturing engagement with the natural world (**Legal India, n.d.; WeChronicle, 2023**). Unlike more abstract, rule-based ethical systems, the ethics of care emerges from lived experiences and relationships, especially those of women. It recognizes the mutual vulnerability of human and non-human life and affirms interdependence as a guiding value in ecological stewardship (**Legal India, n.d.**).

➤ *Intersectionality and Critical Reflections*

Despite its strengths, ecofeminism is not without critique. Scholars caution against essentialist tendencies—the idea that women are inherently more caring or naturally closer to the environment (**Legal India, n.d.; Singh, 2019**). A nuanced, intersectional ecofeminism must account for the ways in which caste, class, and colonial legacies shape women's environmental experiences and forms of resistance (**Suresh, 2021**). In India, voices from Dalit, Adivasi, and other marginalized communities remind us that ecological injustice often overlaps with systemic social oppression, highlighting the need for a broader, more inclusive framework of ecofeminist engagement.

Gandhian Women Environmentalists: Case Studies

➤ *Vandana Shiva: Seed Sovereignty and Ecological Resistance*

About the author Dr Vandana Shiva is a world renowned activist who has battled against the corporate takeover of agriculture and in favor of seed sovereignty. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's principles of swadeshi and self-sufficiency, she founded the Navdanya organization in 1991. Navdanya works on the conservation of biodiversity and organic farming and farmers rights. For Shiva, seed saving is a new form of satyagraha a truth-force against the rise of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and of life organised according to the rules of the market and by patents.

Her work embodies the Gandhian ideal of non-violence against economic imperialism, as well as promoting food sovereignty and ecological justice. Shiva's activism is entirely compatible with ecofeminists, who emphasize the indispensable role of rural women in safeguarding. Her philosophy calls for living with the Earth not above it and reminds us of the quiet strength found in care, cooperation, and resistance (**Shiva, 2016**).

➤ ***MedhaPatkar: The Narmada Movement and Environmental Justice***

MedhaPatkar, the driving force behind the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), is currently regarded as a symbol of Gandhian resistance for her continuous battle against massive dam projects on the Narmada River. The NBA has campaigned against forced displacement, environmental degradation, and the erosion of the rights of tribal and rural populations.

Patkar's leadership combines *ahimsa* with grassroots mobilization, including hunger strikes and peaceful protests—strategies that directly reflect Gandhian *satyagraha*. She consistently argues that development must be just, ecologically sound, and people-centered. Her activism bridges environmental advocacy with social justice, emphasizing the need to prioritize marginalized voices over exploitative models of economic growth (Dwivedi, 2006).

➤ ***Sugathakumari: Environmental Poetics and Forest Activism***

Sugathakumari, a celebrated Malayalam poet and environmentalist, played a pivotal role in Kerala's ecological awakening during the 1980s. Imbued from an early age with Gandhian philosophy and the investigative reporting of Indian spiritual traditions, she became a prominent foe of a proposed hydroelectric project that would have flooded one of India's last remaining rainforests, in the Silent Valley in the state of Kerala.

Her active commitment was in response to her empathy, deep respect for life, and integrity of ecological consciousness—that are all central dimensions of Gandhian and ecofeminist thinking. Sugathakumari, the founder of Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithi also integrated poetic sensibility with political activism, prompting an 'explosion of public interest' and expanding the culture of environmental care in Kerala (Guha, 2000).

Conclusion

The peregrinations of Gandhian women environmentalists (Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, and Sugathakumari) take us to the profound and transformative intersections of gender, ecology, and nonviolence. Rooted in Gandhian principles of *swaraj*, *ahimsa*, and *gram swaraj*, their activism is a challenge to exploitative development models and the recovery of community-based, ecologically responsive modes of living. Their action is not an exercise in environmental protest—it is an articulation of a broader ethic of care: for the planet, for disprivileged people, and for the yet-to-be-born.

In the midst of ongoing challenges, ranging from gender-based discrimination to state repression and pushback from corporate interests, these women persist in organizing movements that are bold yet humane. Their leadership reshapes what it takes to resist—not violence, but moral clarity, inclusivity, and collective responsibility. In a time plagued by climate disaster and ecological disconnection, they remind us that true sustainability has to be founded on justice, empathy, and decentralization—exactly the principles Gandhi advocated for.

Identifying and elevating these voices is not only vital—it is essential. Their work needs a place on the stage of environmental policy, in the halls of academic research, and in the public sphere. As we face ever more pressing ecological challenges, the record of Gandhian women environmentalists provides more than protest—it provides vision, direction, and a template for a better and more sustainable world.

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