IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Living Gandhi: Ecofeminist Practices Among Rural Women in Contemporary India

[1]Ms.T.ABOORVA, [2]Dr.R.MANI,

[1]Full Time Research Scholar, [2]Professor & Head,

[1]Department of Gandhian Thought and Peace Science,

[1]The Gandhigram Rural Institute Deemed to be University, Dindigul, TN, IND

Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi's ideas about the environment have become more important now, especially with the current environmental problems. However, the work of women who follow these ideas in their daily lives often goes unrecognized. This article looks at how women in rural and tribal areas of India are living out Gandhi's principles like nonviolence, self-rule, and trusteeship through their efforts to protect the environment. From the water defenders in Bundelkhand to the seed-saving women in Navdanya, and from forest protectors in the Himalayas to farmers in dry areas of Odisha, these women are fighting for environmental justice using peaceful means, community-based solutions, and taking care of the environment in a meaningful way. The article uses ecofeminist ideas to show how these women challenge both environmental damage and the unfair treatment women face, offering a model of environmental ethics that is based on care, simplicity, and community strength. By focusing on their real-life experiences, this article shows that Gandhi's environmental ideas are not just theories but are practiced in everyday life. It also highlights the need to see women as the key people who will help shape India's future for the environment.

Keywords: Gandhian Environmentalism, Ecofeminism, Rural Women, Grassroots Movements

Introduction

India is now facing a serious environmental problem. This includes losing forests, not having enough water, losing different kinds of plants and animals, and being more vulnerable to the effects of climate change. These problems are because of how the country has been developing—by focusing on industry, consumer habits, and taking natural resources. To address this growing imbalance, we can look to Mahatma Gandhi’s ideas about the environment.

His vision is based on values like not harming living things (Ahimsa), being self-reliant (Swaraj), and taking care of the environment together (Trusteeship). Gandhi’s ideas about the environment were not just thoughts on paper. He believed in living simply, being in harmony with nature, and living in a way that is not dependent on large systems. One thing that is often overlooked, both in general environmental discussions and in studies about Gandhi, is the important role of women, especially women from rural and tribal areas.

These women are living out and promoting Gandhi’s environmental values through their daily work and activism. They are not just talking about sustainability—they are living it by saving seeds, managing water, protecting forests, and caring for their communities. Their efforts to stop environmental damage are peaceful, ethically strong, and deeply connected to their culture, care for others, and ability to endure. This article looks at how rural Indian

women, through their everyday environmental actions and working together, show a real form of ecofeminism inspired by Gandhi. Using real examples and strong moral values about the environment, the paper calls for recognizing these women as key protectors of the environment and the future of India.

Gandhian Environmentalism – Principles and Relevance

Gandhian thought is no longer seen as a sentimental ideal in a time defined by ecological collapse and climate catastrophe, but rather as a revolutionary and profoundly relevant alternative to unsustainable modernity. Even if Gandhi's philosophy wasn't stated in environmental words, his core tenets ahimsa, swadeshi, sarvodaya, and trusteeship—represent an ecological worldview based on moderation, harmony, and moral accountability (**Sarkar, 2013; Narayanasamy, 2003**).

His well-known statement that "The Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs but not every man's greed" is a rebuke of materialism and overconsumption (**Parel, 1997**). Gandhi objected to industrial civilization because, in addition to economic inequality, it fostered unsustainable lifestyles and alienated people from the environment (**Guha, 2019; Shiva, 1988**).

Nonviolence (ahimsa) includes the planet. According to Gandhi, destroying the environment is a kind of violence. Cutting down forests unnecessarily, poisoning rivers, or mining minerals excessively are all examples of disturbing the balance of life (**Kumar, 2006**). According to his ethical framework, humans are not the masters of nature but rather the stewards in charge of taking care of it.

According to Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj, village economies should be decentralized, self-sufficient, and ecologically self-sufficient. It emphasized low consumption patterns, local manufacturing, and environmental stewardship (**Narayanasamy, 2003; Singh, 2009).** His stress on swadeshi was not just political but also ecological, as it honored native knowledge and reduced reliance on exploitative worldwide regimes. Human beings are positioned as stewards of wealth—both material and ecological—on behalf of society by trusteeship, another Gandhian invention (**Khoshoo & Moolakkattu, 2009**). The notion is now reflected in UN frameworks on sustainability and intergenerational equity as well as in worldwide environmental justice campaigns.

Ramachandra Guha (2019) contends that Gandhi's philosophy offers "a civilizational critique" of the modern economy that emphasizes ethical consumption, community-based production, and ecological ethics. In a similar vein, the United Nations Environment Program (2019) recognized Gandhi's contribution to environmental thought and advised modern societies to revisit his principles for sustainable living.

Ecofeminism in the Indian Context

- **The Feminine-Earth Connection** In many rural and tribal communities, women have traditionally been the caretakers of land, water, and seeds. Their daily labor — gathering firewood, fetching water, cultivating food — ties them intimately to the rhythms of nature. When these ecosystems are destroyed, it is **women who suffer first and fight back earliest**. Vandana Shiva (1988), a leading voice in Indian ecofeminism, argues that capitalist patriarchy “replaces diversity with monocultures and women’s knowledge with external technocratic control,” leading to both ecological and social collapse.

Gandhi’s vision aligns naturally with these women-centered environmental movements. His principles of **nonviolence, local self-reliance, and ethical living** resonate with the values rural women practice — not by choice, but by necessity. According to Shiva, rural women represent the “embodiment of ecological balance,” living Gandhi’s teachings more faithfully than most modern political leaders.

Ecofeminist Movements in India

- ***Chipko Movement (1970s – Uttarakhand)***

To stop contractors from cutting down trees, women in Uttarakhand's Himalayan communities hugged them. The demonstration was against the loss of firewood, fodder, water, and life, not simply deforestation. Women such Gaura Devi spearheaded the movement, which gained worldwide recognition as an example of applied ecofeminism (**Rangan, 2000**).

- **The Navdanya Movement (1980s–present – Pan-India)**

Navdanya, which was established by Dr. Vandana Shiva, advocates for seed sovereignty, organic farming, and biodiversity while opposing genetically modified seeds. The movement enables rural women to become "seed savers," revitalizing traditional knowledge and opposing corporate dominance over agriculture (**Shiva, 2005**).

- **Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat: Narmada Bachao Andolan (1985–present**).

Even though it wasn't just a women's movement, tribal women like Medha Patkar actively participated in the NBA, opposing massive dam projects that uprooted thousands of people and destroyed rivers. Their demonstrations were based on both Gandhian satyagraha and ecofeminist ideas about protecting life, land, and culture (**Roy, 1999**).

Live Ecofeminists: Rural Women

- **Organic Agriculture and Seed Sovereignty**

Indigenous seeds, which are a biodiversity treasure in the era of monoculture and GMOs, are protected by women all over rural India. Thousands of women are establishing community seed banks, producing organic crops, and preserving heirloom seeds through initiatives like Navdanya. In accordance with Gandhi's Swadeshi ideology, these practices advance local control, sustainability, and food security.

"Every seed we save represents both a symbol of defiance against industrial agriculture and a symbol of women's empowerment."

- **Earth Democracy, Vandana Shiva (2005**)

According to studies, seed conservation led by women improves ecological resilience and lessens farmers' reliance on big firms (**Shiva & Bedi, 2002**). Their work demonstrates an ethical environmental awareness and supports live biodiversity.

- **Water Warriors and Forest Protectors**

Women in arid areas such as Bundelkhand and Marathwada walk miles every day to get water. But more and more, they are also in charge of forming village-level water management groups, constructing check dams, and restoring ponds. According to NGOs like Tarun Bharat Sangh, women are at the center of water harvesting initiatives that have revived over 11,000 water bodies in Rajasthan (**Agarwal & Narain, 1999**).

Tribal women in Odisha and Chhattisgarh's forest communities similarly establish forest protection committees, monitor unlawful logging operations, and administer community forests, carrying on the Chipko tradition. These women are driven by a sense of duty to the environment and future generations, not by rules.

- **Nonviolent Opposition and Grassroots Activism**

Modern satyagrahis, many rural women head nonviolent demonstrations against mining, industrial pollution, and displacement. To illustrate:

Adivasi women have staged protests against coal mining projects in Korba, Chhattisgarh, that harm their forests and pollute rivers.Fisherwomen conducted peaceful demonstrations in Kudankulam, Tamil Nadu, out of concern that the nuclear facility would put their environment and way of life in danger (**Sundar, 2014**).

Although these demonstrations may not employ ecofeminist terminology, they do embody the ecofeminist ideals of nonviolent, community-led action to safeguard life, land, and the future, much in the vein of Gandhi.

- **Cultural Knowledge and Spiritual Ecology**

Rural women frequently view their relationship with nature as a sacred kinship rather than as a source of resources. Trees are viewed as forefathers, rivers are viewed as mothers, and seeds are seen as a living legacy. This viewpoint accords with Gandhian ethics of respect and moderation, as well as ecofeminist stress on the spiritual and interpersonal dimensions of ecology.

According to ethnographic studies conducted in Gujarat and Jharkhand, women employ folk songs, rituals, and festivals to pass down ecological knowledge through the generations (**Narayan, 2018**). Far from extractive capitalism, this intergenerational environmental education maintains a moral economy of care.

Conclusion

The lived realities of rural eco-women in India reflect a profound and grounded manifestation of Gandhian environmentalism and ecofeminist ethics. Despite facing marginalization based on caste, class, and gender, these women engage in meaningful acts of resistance and care that embody key Gandhian principles such as nonviolence (*ahimsa*), self-reliance (*swadeshi*), and trusteeship.

They conserve forests, safeguard rivers, practice organic farming, and oppose development projects that threaten their local ecosystems — not as formal activists, but as everyday stewards of the environment. Their efforts highlight that environmentalism is not confined to elite narratives or urban-centered movements; rather, it is deeply embedded in rural, lived, and gendered experiences and practices.

Yet, their vital contributions are often overlooked. These women continue to face intersecting challenges — including landlessness, patriarchal constraints, state surveillance, and the growing impacts of climate change — all of which emphasize the pressing need for their recognition in policymaking, academia, and institutional frameworks.

As ecofeminist thinkers like Shiva (1988) and Mies & Shiva (1993) have argued, achieving sustainable development requires decentralized, inclusive, and gender-equitable systems of governance. Valuing the voices and knowledge of rural eco-women is not only a moral responsibility, but also a crucial step toward building true ecological resilience.

Reference

- Agarwal, A., & Narain, S. (1999). *Community and household water management: The key to environmental regeneration and poverty alleviation*. Centre for Science and Environment.
- Guha, R. (2019). *Environmentalism: A global history* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Khoshoo, T. N., & Moolakkattu, J. S. (2009). *Mahatma Gandhi and the environment: Analysing Gandhian environmental thought*. TERI Press.
- Kumar, S. (2006). *Gandhi's vision and values: The environmental dimension*. Gandhi Peace Foundation.
- Mies, M., & Shiva, V. (1993). *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books.

- Narayan, U. (2018). Cultural ecology in tribal India: Gendered knowledge and practice. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 60, 123–130.
- Narayanasamy, N. (2003). *Participatory rural appraisal: Principles, methods and application*. SAGE Publications.
- Parel, A. J. (Ed.). (1997). *Gandhi: 'Hind Swaraj' and other writings*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rangan, H. (2000). *Of myths and movements: Rewriting Chipko into Himalayan history*. Verso.
- Roy, A. (1999). The greater common good. *Frontline*, 16(11).
- Sarkar, S. (2013). Gandhi and the environment: Towards a Gandhian ecology. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(20), 42–48.
- Shiva, V. (1988). *Staying alive: Women, ecology, and development*. Zed Books.
- Shiva, V. (2005). *Earth democracy: Justice, sustainability and peace*. South End Press.
- Shiva, V., & Bedi, G. (2002). *Sustainable agriculture and food security: The impact of globalization*. Sage Publications.
- Singh, S. (2009). Decentralised governance and Gandhian concept of village Swaraj. *Kurukshetra*, 57(12), 3–7.
- Sundar, N. (2014). Protests, resistance and everyday life in Central India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49(41), 48–54.
- United Nations Environment Programme. (2019). *Gandhi and environment: Relevance in today's world*. https://www.unep.org