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## SUSTAINABLE NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES AND CONTEXTUALIZED ACTION



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## INDEX

SL.NO.	CONTENTS	PAGE NO
1.	INTEGRATED FARMING SYSTEM - AN ECOFRIENDLY APPROACH FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT - A REVIEW <i>*Rev.Dr.L.Vasanthi Medona ICM</i>	1
2.	CONSERVATION STATERGIES FOR MARINE BIODIVERSITY <i>*Dr. Maria Saroja M</i>	8
3.	GREEN LIBRARY FOR ENVIRONMENT SUSTAINABILITY <i>*Pradeep Kumar N, **Dr. Maria Rex Sugirtha C</i>	16
4.	A STUDY ON CONSUMER PERCEPTION TOWARDS GREEN PRODUCTS IN TIRUNELVELI DISTRICT <i>*Dr. Palavesakrishnan</i>	20
5.	AIR POLLUTION: TYPES, CAUSES AND ITS EFFECTS ON HUMAN HEALTH <i>*Sathishkumar G, **Dr. Sengamalam @ Vaanathi R</i>	29
6. ✓	AWARENESS OF ENVIRONMENTAL LEGISLATIONS AND POLICY <i>*Mahesh Kumar R, ** Deepa R.P</i>	36
7.	A STUDY ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AWARENESS OF HIGHER SECONDARY SCIENCE GROUP STUDENTS AND THEIR PARTICIPATION IN NATIONAL GREEN CORPS <i>*Nancy.A, ** Dr. Denisia S P</i>	45
8.	INTEGRATED FARMING SYSTEM FOR LIVELIHOOD AND NATURAL RESOURCE SECURITY <i>* Navanetha G</i>	56
9.	WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH INTEGRATED FARMING SYSTEMS <i>*Dr. Jeya Sudha A</i>	61
10. ✓	ROLE OF WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY <i>*Sangeetha G S, ** Dr.Deepa R P</i>	68
11.	ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT <i>*Daniel Sathya Singh G</i>	76
12.	EARTH WATER & EARTH LIFE MANAGEMENT <i>*Dr. Jeya Selva Kumari T</i>	81



14.	ORGANIC FARMING – A POSITIVE LINE TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE AND HEALTHY FUTURE <b>*Vinothini Sylvia A</b>	92
15.	AIR POLLUTION <b>*Shunmugap Priya N</b>	99
16.	ORGANIC FARMING AS TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS OF WOMEN <b>*Jebasheela Jenifer S</b>	105
17.	CONCEPTUALIZING FEMINISM, ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES FROM ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES <b>*Dr. Lavanya .V, **Balasubramanian R</b>	110
18.	ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS <b>*Dr. Theresita Shanthy N, **Rashmi Savera K</b>	115
19.	ENVIRONMENTAL TECHNOLOGY: A RESCUER OF NATURAL RESOURCES <b>*Rawoofu Nisha J, ** Shiba R A</b>	120
20.	WOMEN: A POWER FOR NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT <b>*Dr. Guru Vasuki S, **Dr. Prema Latha S</b>	126
21.	CLIMATE CHANGE: AN OVERVIEW <b>*Kannan B, **Dr. Sengamalam @ Vaanathi R</b>	132
22.	WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN ENVIRONMENTAL PRESERVATION <b>*Ramya S, **Dr. Antony Arockia Anufia Mel A</b>	140
23.	PRACTICES AND POLICY PERSPECTIVE FOR ELECTRONIC WASTE MANAGEMENT IN INDIA <b>*Lilly Maria Praveena A</b>	144
24.	Marine Biodiversity: Importance and Threats <b>*Bhuvaneshwari R, **Lakshitha Sri R</b>	149
25.	CREATING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE: CONTRIBUTION OF IOT TO MOTHER NATURE <b>*Ponmalar M</b>	154
26.	CONSERVATION OF FOREST RESOURCES <b>*Dr. Johncy Rose P</b>	160
27.	THE IMPORTANCE OF GREEN SPACES IN IMPROVING PUBLIC HEALTH AND REDUCING ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION <b>*Vennila Santha Ruby C **Dr. Delighta Mano Joyce M I</b>	165
28.	ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND WOMEN'S HEALTH <b>*Sujitha G, **Dr. Antony Vinolya S</b>	171



## ROLE OF WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

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### ABSTRACT

Ecological movements are organized at all periods of time at different parts of the world for environmental protection and conservation. As a result, the environment is protected from getting deteriorated. Exploitation of natural resources and overpopulation by the people to meet their own needs create threats to the environment. Women have direct contact with all natural resources, especially in rural areas where 70% of Indian population directly depends upon natural resources. Women play an important role since ancient times to conserve the environment without taking care of their lives. Woman was always there in contact with nature for their house hold works and their daily needs. So they can understand nature's pain and how will it affect the future generation. Before 18th and 19th century, it was considered that women have no role in environmental conservation and promotion, as well as they were avoided in all major sphere of social life. But after spreading awareness about their rights and duties and taking cognizance of their surroundings. They consciously tried to raise voice against environment degradation; various environmental movements like Bishnoi movement, Chipko Movement, Aapiko movement, the silent Valley Movement and Narmada Bachao Andolan are the significant environmental movements that reflect the integral leadership of women in the society. Women always play a pivotal role in conservation of biodiversity, water resource and against the construction of hydroelectric project. The government of India has adopted various policies and programmes which include women as decision makers while making environmental policies by involving women from the grassroots level and spread awareness towards conservation of the environment. But India has long miles to go to make equitable gender sensitive environmental policies in true sense.

**Keywords:** Environmental movement, women, water resource, grassroots level, gender sensitive.

### Introduction

Environment comes from the French word 'environner' means surround. Environment is the sum total of water, air, land and their interrelationships among themselves and also with human beings.



other living organisms, and property. India is considered itself as mother of earth. As a mother nurtured their children, take care of her children in their womb, like wise earth also take care of its people reside in it. But the super animal human being has been aggressively exploiting the very natural environment to fulfill their needs. Overpopulation and technological advancement are continuously putting threat to the environment and exploits the natural resources. Women were considered as a weaker sex since ancient times but women were predominantly responsible for management and conservation of resources for their families. In 1970s, an interest in women and their connection with the environment was sparked by a book titled "Woman's Role in Economic Development" written by Ester Boserup. Starting in the 1980s, policy makers and governments became more mindful of the connection between the environment and gender issues. According to the World Bank in 1991, "Women play an essential role in the management of natural resources, including soil, water, forests and energy and often has a profound traditional and contemporary knowledge of the natural world around them". The interdependence of women with nature can be evolved from the following observations:

1. Women are having base and skills for natural resource management.
2. They are better managers for natural resources.
3. They have sensitiveness towards environmental changes and climatic variations.
4. They have high ecological consciousness.

Recent studies revealed that women are the direct victims of such environmental degradation, pollution etc. to illustrate, in some areas a few decades back women went to fetch water from sources that were few feet away. But now, because of excessive mining and allied activities, they have to walk miles together for a pot of drinking water. Though environmental degradation affects the human beings in general, women are considered to be the main victims of environmental degradation. Women's direct contact with environment has produced them deep- knowledge about the environment. Women in India are playing a crucial role in protection and conservation of environment. Women in our country have brought a different perspective to the environment debate, because of their different experience base. Poor women's lives are not compartmentalized and they see the issues in a broad perspective. They understand clearly that economics and environment are compatible. Women have recorded successes in solving environmental problems all over the world. In India, the women realized that degradation of productive land has led to the erosion of top soil; the choking of water drainage was causing salinity and loss of food crops. They collectively lease



degraded land and revived them through traditional farming. In three years, 700 acres of land were restored to productive use. Women and the environment are closely bound and interconnected. Throughout history, women have been immortalized as powerful symbols of nature: Mother Earth, Earth Goddess, and Artemis in the Greek mythology, and Mother River (the Yellow River) in Chinese history.

### **Role of women in environmental conservation**

The women participation in conservation of Environment is well known from 1731, near Jodhpur, Rajasthan by the Bishnoi Women. Amrita Bai of Khejarali Village sacrificed her life as she embraced the Khejri tree as the Bishnois regarded this tree as sacred which is considered as the first environmental movement in world. In 1972, in Chamoli district in Uttarakhand, Chipko Movement had started by Sundarlal Bahuguna, Bachni Devi and Gaura devi. Then in 1978, on the silent valley of Palakkad district of Kerala, where poetess Sughatha Kumari had played an important role against construction of hydroelectric project. In 1982, Navadanya Movement had started by environmental activist Vandana Shiva which was an ecofeminist movement to promote biodiversity by engaging women. In 1983, Aapiko movement had started by villagers of Uttarkannada district of Karnataka province which involves a large number of rural women in participation. The movement was against the commercial forest policy which had caused the destruction on ecosystem of the Sirsi forest. Another most significant environmental movement where women had played a pivotal role is Narmada Bachao Andolan. Under the leadership of Medha Patkar, in 1989 some activists had launched this movement against the construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River, Gujrat. Currently, there are many more environmental activists who have been working vehemently for the protection and conservation of the environment. Among them Padma Shri award winner Sunita Narain, who focuses on sustainable development and fighting climate change. Another Padma Shri award winner Jamuna Tadu, who is also known as 'Lady Tarzen' of Jharkhand forest. She along with 100 Adivasi women has been protecting Jharkhand forest from mafia from last 20 years. Radha Bhatt, who started Nadi Bachao Abhiyan in 2008 opposing construction of hydroelectric power project which has created the devastation of river Ganga as well as damaged the ecosystem of all tributaries adjoining of it. Thus women actively participate in environment protection than men as women are directly affected and influenced by nature than men. Women have been involved in several governmental and non-governmental forestry and environment programs.



### **Bishnoi Movement -1731**

The first ever environmental movement is not only in India but also in the world had started in 1731 where women sacrifice their life to save trees. Bishnois movement began with the royal order of Maharaja Abhay Singh to cutting of Khejri trees, worshipped by Bishnois, for construction of fortress. The villagers under the leadership of Amrita Devi protested against the order as she hugged the tree. Amrita Devi and her three daughters were beheaded for disobeying royal order. Just before her death, Amrita Devi declared, "If a tree is saved even at the cost of one's head, its worth". This movement started by Amrita Bai in 1731 A D was revived by Bachni Devi and Gaura Devi of Uttar Pradesh in 1972. They snatched the axe from the wood cutters and warned contractors not to cut the trees. There were 363 villagers were killed by the soldiers for the check of protection of trees. At last the king cease the operation and designated Bishnoi as protected area which is exist as same till now. They are upholding eco friendly principles still by saving water by traditional water harvesting system, indigenous cultivation method for local areas and not killing any animals. Thus Bishnois movement laid the foundation of environment protection movement in India.

**Chipko Movement – 1973**-In 1973, in Uttarkhand's Chamoli district District the entire ash tree was allotted to the Simon Company for commercial purpose. The movement begins with the government refusal to supply ash tree to the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Mandal (DGSM), (workers' cooperative) for processing plant of forest produces (especially for making plough) in Chamoli District. Instead government gave green signal for Simon Company to cut ash trees for production of sporting goods. The DGSM organised protest against government decision to promote Simon Company instead of villagers. The movement was led by Sundarlal Bahuguna, Gura Devi and Sudesha Devi. Chipko (a hindi word, meaning "to hug" or "cling to") which was used to describe the local women was literally hugging the tress from cutting by the loggers. Gaura Devi referred to the trees as her "maika" (mother's home) and invited the loggers to shoot them instead of harming the forest. Similarly, Sudesha Devi spearheaded the women's drive to protect the Rampur forest from contractors. After many days of protest, the government canceled the company's permit and granted it to the villagers.

**Appiko movement- 1983**- Appiko movement is important environment conservation movement in Karnataka, to protect Western Ghats forest. Appikko movement was initiated by Panduranga Hegde. In September 1983, men, women and children of Salkani (a village in Western Ghats) "hugged the trees" in Kalase forest. This movement was against government policy to open forest for industrial



development. The members of Mahila Mandal include Adivasi women joined for protection of rainforest by writing down to the government for halting of woodcutting. The village women conducted awareness programmes through foot marches, slideshows, folk dance, street plays, and dramas. Thus with the strong protest from people, Government forced to halt industrial policy on Western Ghats which resulted in destruction of forest.

**Silent Valley movement- 1976** -Silent Valley is one of the important biodiversity hotspot in Southern end of Western Ghats in Kerala. The Silent Valley Movement was against the decision of Kerala Government to construct a dam for hydroelectric power project in the Silent Valley forest. The Malayalam poet and environmentalist, Sugatha Kumari was the prominent leader in this movement. Despite the offer of employment and development in the area, people, especially women opposed the hydro electricity project. As a result the project was cancelled by personal interventions of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1980 and Silent Valley was declared as a National Park in 1984.

**Narmada Bachao Andolan - 1985** -India's Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) is an environment movement against the building of a number of dams along the Narmada River funded by World Bank. The NBA spread to three states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh consist of 30 major, 135 medium and 3000 small dams whereas the dam would displace 3,20,000 tribal and submerged over 37000 hectares of forest and agricultural land as the construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam affect the environment and settlement of people of these areas. NBA, which led by the Medha Patkar, Baba Amte, and Arundhati Roy had turned into the international protest, gaining support from NGO'S all around the globe. It was basically a Gandhian way of protest of non-violence as organized satyagraha and hunger strike. With strong protest from NBA World Bank withdraw project in 1993. But the case continued in Supreme Court.

**Navdanya movement- 1984-** Navdanya is India's largest organic movement. Navdanya began in 1984 as a program of the Research Foundation for science, Technology and Ecology (RFSTE), a participatory research initiative to provide direction and support to environmental activism. "Navdanya" means "nine crops" that represent India's collective source of food security (Preston -Pile, 2007). The main aim of Navdanya is to save seeds from biopiracy<sup>34</sup> and with this intention, setup 111 Community seed banks<sup>35</sup> in 17 states in India. They are strongly campaigning



against Genetically Modified Seeds and actively participating in biodiversity conservation. Mostly the members of Navdanya Movement are women farmers from various parts of country.

### **Women concern for nature around India**

Women have an integral relation with the environment. In fact, women have contributed greatly to the conservation movements in the past.

- ❖ Amrita Devi: woman who started Bishnoi movement.
- ❖ Gaura Devi: an activist who organized Chipko Movement.
- ❖ Medha Patkar: An environmentalist known for her active role in the Narmada Bachao Andolan.
- ❖ Sunita Narain: She is the Director General of Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), and publisher of Down to Earth. After the loss of tigers in Sariska, Sunita chaired the Tiger Task Force for conservation in 2005. She is a member of the Prime Minister's Council for Climate Change and National Ganga River Basin Authority (which employ practices to clean the river).
- ❖ Menaka Gandhi: She is an animal rights leader as well as an environmentalist. In 1994, she founded people for Animals, the largest organisation for animal's welfare in India. She believed in ahimsa and the fact that India was in need of a movement to stop the cruel treatment meted out to animals. So she anchored a TV program "Heads and Tails" and authored a book. She now chairs the Jury of International Energy Globe Foundation which annually awards the best environmental innovations of the year.
- ❖ Vandhana Shiva: A Delhi based environmentalist and eco feminist well known for her proletarian efforts to protect forests, organize women's networks, and conserve local biodiversity. She was awarded the 1993 Right Livelihood Award, considered parallel to the Nobel Prize. Navdanya, a national movement to protect the diversity of living resources, was created in 1991. Since its 20 years of existence, more than 2000 varieties of rice have been conserved and 34 seed banks established in 13 states nationwide.
- ❖ Sugathakumari – A poet and environmentalist. Prakriti Samrakshana Samithi was founded by her who also participated in the 'Save Silent Valley' protest.
- ❖ Radha Bhatt – Actively formulating in the Uttarakhand Nadi Bachao Abhiyan in 2008 to oppose the construction of a series of hydel power projects that not only threatened the flow of the Ganga and most of its tributaries but imperiled the fragile, heavily deforested ecosystem of the Himalayan state, Radha Bhatt led 2000 kilometers march to voice for people's water rights.



## Conclusion

Women played a significant role in the environmental protection. Furthermore, women can help control population explosion which has been one of the major factors in environmental degradation conditions. Women have always played a critical role in meeting household and community energy needs. Inadequate energy resources and a lack of access to efficient technologies of energy utilization force the people to depend on their own labour, animal power and bio-mass energy to meet their daily requirements. With adequate environmental education and awareness women can conserve energy resources far more efficiently as compared to men. Women are responsible for the cleanliness of the household, on which depends the health and wealth of the family members. With proper education and training one can minimize the experiences and incidences of most of the water, food and airborne diseases. Traditionally women were kept away from the powers of decision making. Their unequal access to education and lack of decision making authority at all levels has lowered their position in the society. As a result it has had adverse effects on income, nutrition, health, social support networks and domestic knowledge. The World Bank estimated that environment degradation is costing around 5.7% of the country's GDP every year. History witnessed that how women have been playing an integral part and parcel in conserving and protecting environment which is so much successful so far. Women have been always considered the symbol of kindness and love. Therefore, being a mother they know the pain when their children get hurt likewise they know the pain of earth when her plants, rivers are damaged. Development is necessary, but it should not at the cost of environment. Development is fruitless without lives and without environment no lives can exist in the earth. It is need of hour to pay strong attention towards women involvement in the decision making process and making gender sensitive environmental policies.

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