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# The very many faces of Chipko: the role of gender in a grassroots environmental activism movement

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## INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

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The Chipko movement in northern India, also referred to as the “hug-a-tree movement”, is often used as a model example of second-wave environmentalism in the Third World. Its grassroots nature confers it a dimension outside the usual academic scope of environmentalism in the west.

Indian religion and culture work in close proximity to theoretically conserve the environment that many rural communities rely on. By encouraging a western model of development in India, women’s livelihoods have directly been affected by the mechanisation of agricultural practices and indirectly affected by the consequences of forest felling. From this threat to survival, the emergence of a movement like Chipko is not only understandable but also necessary.

The literature categorises Chipko as a women’s movement on many occasions, however, there is a lack of consensus amongst analysts. The objectives of this bibliographic research dissertation are to describe the main analytic viewpoints of Chipko from a gender and social perspective, and to determine the factors that incite the movement.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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Stemming from the relation I aimed to analyse between environment and women, I came across the term ecofeminism. Manisha Rao (2012) published a paper titled “Ecofeminism at a Crossroads in India: a Review” from which I extracted major sources used throughout this dissertation. From focusing mainly on the works of Vandana Shiva, I encountered flaws in ecofeminist discourse which were then later made clear by other prominent analysts of a grassroots environmental movement called Chipko, one of Shiva’s main case studies. Using Google Scholar as a search engine, I proceeded to investigate these other points of view of the movement.

## ANALYSIS

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### 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### THIRD WORLD ENVIRONMENTALISM: SOCIOECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The role of women in environmentalism is intrinsic to the survival of the natural environment. We see a clear example of this with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 which unleashes the movement of second-wave environmentalism in the west. The incidence of this book is noted specifically from the social uproar caused in parts of Europe and North America, commonly holding what are perceived as "developed" countries (Guha 2014). The pretence of them being labelled as "developed" lies within the fact that societies in these countries are thought to have undergone "high levels of industrialization and urbanization, technicalization of agriculture, rapid growth of material production and living standards, and the widespread adoption of modern education and cultural values", which ascribes them to an apparently advanced state of social living (Escobar, 1995, p. 4).

This "modernisation" is seen to be accompanied by a reductionist scientific revolution, which treats non-westernised, more traditional information frameworks as inferior to recently renovated, proposedly objective epistemological research methods (Harding, 1986 cited in Mies & Shiva, 1993, p. 22). In the context of the natural world, the scientific revolution is viewed as reductionist for two reasons: the power of understanding nature to a fuller extent has been diminished due to invalidating sources of knowledge (one example being what we've termed here as non-westernised frameworks of knowledge) and because by treating nature as fragmented within a capitalist mindset, its capacity of renewal has effectively been decreased. Thus, from a western point of view, any society that hasn't attained this superior status of living alongside "scientific enlightenment" is cursed of ignorance (Mies & Shiva, 1993).

In this sense, development is seen as socially constructed by the west (Escobar, 1995), particularly from a male-dominated patriarchal standpoint (Mies & Shiva, 1993), to describe the western model of modernisation. The argument is that if science and technology are not evolving as they did once in the west outside of it, they should aim

to do so in its emulation (Bird, 1984 cited in Escobar, 1995, p. 159). This describes a developmental strategy termed catch-up development by Maria Mies & Vandana Shiva (1993). After all, if “adequate tools [...] have already been created for such a task, the value of which has already been proved by their successful application in the West”, why should non-western countries not adopt the same course in history? (Escobar, 1995, p. 26) The hierarchy of worlds then comes to life as created by the west, who identifies itself with the “First World” and baptises countries who have not yet or are in the midst of development as the “Third World” (Escobar, 1995).

What the west sometimes fails to identify, however, is the reliance they had on their colonial powers in these Third World countries for their modernisation. Depleting resources and exploiting the natural environment in their colonies during early industrial development in western Europe, effectively externalising all their costs, is what drove capitalist growth (Luxemburg, 1951 cited in Mies & Shiva, 1993). Countries outside the west are not allowed this luxury due to them existing in a post-colonial panorama where the west continuously modernises at their expense (Mies & Shiva, 1993). In hopes of them mimicking their colonisers, countries like India were introduced to western industrial development techniques. The problem with these introductions lies within the fundamental organizational and cultural differences between societies in and outside the west. Specifically, the caste system in India, alongside religious and cultural values, pose a threat to the general population taking up jobs to aid the western model of industrial development in their country. For example, aside from certain higher castes avoiding pollution producing jobs (such as leather-working, clothes-washing or sweeping) there is a “tendency to keep low castes in the capacity of field laborers” (Cohn, 1958, p. 63 & Lewis, 1954, p. 152 cited in Niehoff, 1959, p. 495). “In the West many of the social values of the group were automatically taken into consideration as industry developed, since they were held by the industrial organizers as well as the workers; in India the dominant social values of the workers were very lightly considered or ignored altogether, since originally the industrial leaders had been foreigners” (Niehoff, 1959, p. 496). These same foreign leaders, after seeing the struggle Third World countries had with their model of development, promoted an Integrated Rural Development (IRD) strategy that sought to widespread the benefits of development

through lower classes of society, which in many Third World countries included the agrarian sector. This plan aimed to increase food production to make these parts of society present in the global market economy. Through introducing technologies which directly and consistently disposed of women's labour in the fields, their jobs were mechanised and new equipment assigned to be managed solely by men (Escobar, 1995).

The IRD programme in India has not proven particularly successful seeing as the "proportion of those living below the poverty line has not declined substantially" (Mathur, 1995, p. 2703). The IRD programme in India specifically aimed to "improve the living standard of those who are below the poverty line including small farmers, marginal farmers, agricultural and non-agricultural labourers" (Maheswari, 1995, p. 123). The lack of success is because strategizing takes place on a macroscale and fails to identify local scale socio-economic variation very present in the country. The idea that decentralised planning would greatly benefit the programme was introduced but in practice, local strategists follow orders from above concerning mainly the central planner's agenda rather than their local one (Mathur, 1995). Many tests for IRD were undergone during colonial rule where there was little room for non-westernised frameworks of knowledge. Both Ghandi and Tagore believed in the growth of India through village empowerment and decentralised power structures, however, they didn't emphasise avoiding the "absorption of Western technology into India and instead they laid emphasis on spiritual aspects of life" (Sreedhar, 2008, p. 79-80).

#### INDIAN WOMEN AND THEIR RELATION TO NATURE

In Indian culture and history there is a clear, evident appreciation and profound respect for the natural world and the fruits it bears. Hinduism presents a code of environmental ethics in which humans are not allowed to consider themselves superior or dominating over the rest of the natural world. Not only is respect shown in this way, but at one point in time, pollution was frowned upon in India because it poisons the body and taints the mind. Pollution of any sort, then, is considered to threaten physical forms in the natural environment which are conferred a spiritual dimension. Furthermore, there is a common practice of nature worship, where forest patches surrounding the settlements of indigenous communities house local deities and ancestral spirits. The sanctity

conferred to these forests grants them with widespread recognition as sacred grove sites. These sites are possibly the most important ancient ecological heritage in Indian culture. Because of the significance of these forests, communities that rely on them feel they have a responsibility to protect them. Forests aren't the only natural elements to be sanctified, many rivers in India are feminised, for example, the river Ganga is worshipped as a goddess, a giver of life. Through this link between biophysicality and spirituality, between nature and culture, Hinduism is said to respect the natural environment, therefore theoretically conserving it in practice (Krishna, 2017).

In India, the link between nature and culture is most evidently witnessed with women. Women in Indian culture are known to cultivate more knowledge about their natural surroundings than their male counterparts and are consequently targeted victims of environmental degradation (Kumar, 1993). This repository of information passed down through generations in rural communities that rely on agriculture, is due to women learning about their surroundings and how these respond to manipulation through farming practices and routine house chores. These will include not only farming for subsistence but also for profit, fetching water, fuel and fodder, amongst other resources (Agarwal, 1992). Considering that 84 per cent of economically active Indian women are represented in the agricultural sector there is an important number under threat due to environmental degradation (Mies & Shiva, 1993). Particularly through resource depletion, women's working days are lengthened where fuel, fodder and water collection require more time to obtain. Lengthening the time it takes for house chores diminishes the time that they can spend in the fields, which can adversely affect crop income, especially in communities where there's high male outmigration (Agarwal, 1992), seeing as "male migration from hill areas to the armed services and other jobs in the plains is fairly common, leaving women to look after the land, livestock and families" (Jain, 1984). Furthermore, it can transcend to health of the general population where women don't have enough time to collect resources and provide adequately for their families, which forces them to survive on undercooked food, many a times falling sick as a result (Agarwal, 1992).



## 2. THE ROLE OF INDIAN WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

In these societies, there's a tendency to side-line women to nature and ascribe men to culture, which is rooted in patriarchal thought seeing as in a capitalist environment nature is viewed as inferior to culture, which further propagates the subjugation of women to men (Agarwal, 1992). This is one of the basis of ecofeminist ideology as described by Mies and Shiva (1993); they argue that the child-bearing capacity of women and their "shared objectification and domination by patriarchal systems of exploitation and control" holds them closer to nature than men (Mawdsley, 1998, p. 43). "The women's and ecology movements are therefore one, and are primarily counter-trends to a patriarchal maldevelopment" (Shiva, 1989, p. 47). After the formalisation of their ideology, it was criticised for being essentialist (Rao, 2012). Shiva often collectivises all Third World women into one category and doesn't account for cast, class or ethnicity. While criticising reductionism in the collection of knowledge she herself illegitimises the richness rooted in intersectional points of view. Moreover, by pointing a finger almost exclusively at the Third Worlds experience of the west, the social and economic factors predating colonialism remain unaddressed in her work. It is clear that these factors, alongside culturally rooted gender inequality, are worth considering (Agarwal, 1992), (Rao, 2012).

Feminist environmentalism, as described by Bina Agarwal (1992), on the other hand, supports that women are linked to the environment but not because of a sense of double oppression, but because of gendered, classist, cast-specific and racialised division of labour and production that fundamentally organises societies in rural India. Because of these two views, among others, on the role and context of women in Indian environmental movements, a consensus on the categorisation of Chipko is lacking in the literature, especially where there is protagonism of village women.

As Mohanty (1984) describes, many intellectuals, especially westerners, portray an image of the "average Third World woman" as a powerless collective that falls victim to socio-political and economic systems. This implies that Third World women are both "traditional [...] also politically immature", on top of being gender-oppressed (Amos &

Parmar, 1984, p. 7). In contrast to the western woman, who is basically gender oppressed but still in control of her body and decisions, Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes the “third world difference!” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 352). The difference defines Third World women as “religious [...], family-oriented [...], legal minors [...], illiterate [...], domestic [...] and sometimes revolutionary” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 352). The limelight shed on these women in movements like Chipko can have very different meanings depending on the point of view of the analyst.

Noel Sturgeon (1997) further discusses the western construction of the “helpless” Third World woman and points out that ecofeminist discourse in the late 1980’s and 1990’s idealises non-western women in two categories: racialised and non-racialised. The racialised are comprised of Third World and Native American women whilst the non-racialised are represented by prehistoric European pagan women. Third World women are often exemplified by Asian women, specifically Indian women from rural settings which have their voices heard as they did during the Chipko movement. Mies and Shiva can also be criticised for creating this binary in ecofeminist discourse (Agarwal, 1992). As an Indian woman herself, Shiva is under pressure to represent racial diversity in ecofeminism and her work is thereafter seen to embody all Third World women. A lot of the focus in the literature about non-westernised women is on sustainable, ecological cultural and economic practices, which reduces the descriptions of these women’s activities to be useful only in defining an opposition to modernised western practices of the same nature. In this sense the discourse tends to idealise indigeneity as truly feminist and boasting of sustainable living standards, whereas in practice, what this constitutes is white privilege. This merely allows western ecofeminists to describe the length to which these categories of women exist in non-industrialised scenarios, portraying rural, Indian village women as natural environmentalists and propagating the idea that they should continue to exist in degraded environments for the benefits that their activism will have for their communities (Sturgeon, 1997), (Rao, 1991). Furthermore, providing for their families can hold women close to nature but doesn’t intrinsically mean they will make decisions based on its survival rather than their family’s: “the responsibility to provide firewood for cooking a meal may lead a woman, when faced with firewood shortage, to plant a tree but it may also lead her to pull up a

wooden fence and burn it, to argue for the purchase of a fuel efficient stove, to insist on the purchase of charcoal, to delegate fuelwood collection to a younger woman in the household or any number of alternate responses” (Jackson, 1993, p. 412). This presents certain bias in the literature and the interpretation of environmentalist movements like Chipko.

As a whole, Shiva heavily influenced this western ecofeminist viewpoint in terms of understanding post-colonial relationships between sexism and environmentalism, however, not only has she been criticised of racial essentialism but also for portraying the Chipko movement as empowering to women when it may as well just be a peasant, populist or environmental movement which has no need to be feminist (Sturgeon, 1997). Agarwal (1992) agrees that Chipko was a result of consistent targeting of women by environmental degradation but the nature of the movement in itself is more of grassroots empowerment than it is female empowerment. Jackson (1993) acknowledges that although there’s extensive representation of women in the movement, leadership is still male and thus in its entirety, Chipko cannot represent a feminist movement. Why do Mies and Shiva see Chipko as an ecofeminist movement where other authors do not? Can an ecofeminist movement not be feminist?

### 3. CHIPKO AS AN EXAMPLE OF GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

Stemming from these targeted threats that catching up development poses to women’s livelihoods, second-wave environmentalism in India is evidently woman-led and has its origins in grassroots actions (Guha, 2014). This is a stark difference from the second-wave environmentalist movements started with the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in the west. Even though grassroots actions are a response to local struggles, their incidence thereafter is global. Forces beyond local powers, such as the scientific and technological advances that accompany the industrial revolution, dictate local survival. The Chipko movement begins as a Gandhian method to protest the felling of forests (Shiva, 1986), which form an important part of sustaining agricultural and animal husbandry practices, as well as being a source of medicinal herbs, dearth and food. Hill peasant’s reliance on these resources was institutionalised through social and cultural

mechanisms, which resulted in their protection through religion, folklore and tradition (Guha, 1991). As mentioned before, some forests are seen as sacred groves in Indian culture. This is the original manner in which deep rooted respect for the environment naturally transcends to its preservation. Such an ideology can also be appreciated from one of Gandhi's sayings: "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need but not enough for any man's greed", a figure of whom many of the women in the Chipko movement are close disciples of (Shiva, 1986).

In Shiva's (1986) analysis of the Chipko movement she emphasises this harmony in which the hill villagers lived with the forests. They knew what was too much for their soils to bear without the need for modern science. This fully changes when the state begins to manage what were community owned forests. Not only this, but the introduction of scientific forestry denied the knowledge hill peasants had acquired of their surroundings through peaceful cohabitation, a clear example of the reductionism we spoke of that accompanies the scientific revolution. The previous absence of the state's intervention facilitated social solidarity, where villagers were tied by similar economic situations, kinship and cast (Guha, 1991). The central management of these lands and their produce brought forth a reality where violence arose from the unfair distribution of justice and resources (Mathur, 1995). Tensions which arise from situations like these are what kickstart grassroots actions like the Chipko movement.

Specifically, the beginning of Chipko is seen in 1973, in Reni village of Garhwal Himalaya after the felling of said forests causes hydrological imbalances and consequent floods (Shiva, 1986). Villagers knew that the presence of forests ensured water stability and the prevention of landslides, which is why they were attributed the sanctity of sacred groves (Guha, 1991). Women from said village recognised this fact after being targeted by the degradation of the environment forest felling signified and, led by Gaura Devi, proceeded to object to the activities by hugging the trees they intended to cut down. This is where the name Chipko comes from: it means "to hug" in Hindi (Shiva, 1986). Though Gaura Devi did organise the women in her village, she did so in response to Chandi Prasad Bhatt, who forms part of the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Mandal (DGSM), a villagers cooperative looking to raise environmental awareness. It was him who had been organising activism in the area and urged the villagers "to hug the trees as a tactic

to save them”, an outcry that was mostly understood and acted upon by women who heard him, an unsurprising response seeing as the forests disappearance would affect their survival the most (Jain, 1984, p. 1792).

## THE NATURE OF CHIPKO

This isolated beginning would not be the end of Chipko. Instead, it would spread through hill towns and districts as a form of protest against the expansion of a capitalist use of resources (Shiva, 1986). The form of protest, despite being Gandhian, is also one that predates colonialism and industrialisation: *Dhandak* is a manifestation of peasants against their rulers, condemning them of acting over the traditional limit to their power (Guha, 1991). The women of Chipko acted for survival in consonance with their male counterparts, who acted against the felling of trees out of concern for raw material supply for saw-mills and resin factories set up by local cooperatives (Shiva, 1989, p. 70). Later in the movement, however, women are seen to act against their male counterparts. In 1980's Doongri-Paintoli, women aimed to preserve their surrounding environment whilst men were content with accepting compensation for the damage made by the Forest Department (Mawdsley, 1998). Through this analysis of Chipko, a question arises: does it reflect more a fight of the peasant against the state rather than an environmental movement empowering women?

Mawdsley (1998) successfully summarises the opinions of two prominent analysts of the movement: Vandana Shiva and Ramachandra Guha. Whilst Shiva argues that the resulting environmental degradation from tree felling targets women's livelihoods specifically and urges them to seek change, Guha presents the sociological as well as the economic subsistence implications before and after the emergence of the “hug-a-tree” movement. Shiva confirms that women are the ultimate leaders of the movement and men, even though prominent in activism, are their disciples (Shiva, 1989). Guha argues that men are at the forefront of the movement, despite extensive representation by women (Guha, 1991). The reality of the situation is well synthesised by Jain (1984): “the Chipko movement is certainly not a women's movement and it does not seek change in the traditional social structure. [...] However, the Chipko workers realised it or not, intended it or not, all those women who participated in the Chipko meetings,

processions and other programmes have become aware of their potentialities and are demanding a share in decision-making process at the community level” (Jain, 1984, p. 1789) Through realising the impact that changes in environment have on their livelihood, women feel compelled to preserve what they deem their right. This may seem counter-productive, seeing as “women are, on the one hand, seeking alterations in their position in society and, on the other hand, supporting a social movement which is basically resisting change”, but really this just brings to light the complexity of social structure and the perils of western development in rural landscapes of post-colonial countries (Jain, 1984, p. 1788).

## CONCLUSIONS

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Would the Chipko movement then be ecofeminist or form part of feminist environmentalism? Is it a social movement against the state regardless of the extensive female representation? The distinction between ecofeminism and feminist environmentalism lies in the perceived role of men in the dynamic of oppression. Ecofeminist discourse affirms that the rise of the patriarchy in a capitalist environment is the onset of a targeted double-oppression towards women and the environment (Mies & Shiva, 1993). Feminist environmentalism relieves men of their protagonism and instead argues that pre-colonial organizational factors such as gender, cast, class and race dictate the division of labour in rural settings and thus the activism that will follow (Agarwal, 1992). Chipko is an ecofeminist movement in the sense that the commence of the western style of development in rural India directly threatens women's livelihood and survival, obliging them to take action to secure their safety (Mies & Shiva, 1993). It is also a form of feminist environmentalism, where the pre-existing gendered division of labour makes women fall victim to environmental degradation and urges them to seek a way to preserve their wellbeing (Agarwal, 1992). Despite these views on the role of women in the movement, it's unarguably a social movement against the state and their power to disrupt time-old traditions, knowledge frameworks and sustainable resource use (Guha, 1991).

Chipko should then be seen as multifaceted, not only because it doesn't occur as an isolated incident but spreads through space and time. In this way, and because it transcends as exemplary grassroots environmentalism in Third World countries as seen by the west, it should not try to be categorised, but instead analysed from different perspectives.

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