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Women as Environmental Agents



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A B S T R A C T

Women have an integral relation with the environment. Infact women have contributed greatly to the conversation of environmental movements in the past. The best example is the Chipko movement, when women led by Guara Devi protested determinedly against the commercial mistreatment of the Himalayan forests. Elsewhere also, women were active in agitations against deforestation, construction of large dams and mining activities. Women have always played a critical role in meeting household and community energy needs. With adequate environmental education and awareness women can conserve energy resources for work efficiently as compared to men. Therefore women are essential for any measure aimed at environmental protection and sustainable development.

Keywords: Environment, Movement, Protection, Women.

Methodology: The study is based on historical analytical methods. It is based on both primary and secondary sources.

Objectives: The aim of the study to highlight the role of women in environmental protection movements and their contribution in raising environmental consciousness.

Introduction:-

In this modern and developed world, much of what has been gained in regards to women's human rights has been thanks to the efforts of women themselves. Women have achieved dramatic changes in policies, laws and practices even though they encounter various risks as human rights defenders because of their gender and due the issues they address. The two most influential women personalities of the twentieth century are Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher. Indira Gandhi has changed India whereby, Margaret Thatcher has changed Britain. Indira was described as the only woman in her cabinet, much as Margaret was in Britain. The assumption being that it is only men who shape our destinies and alters our events, but there are other vivid examples of women who have overturned such conventional wisdom.

Rose Parks' refusal to give up her seat in a bus to a white man triggered the civil rights movement in America, leading to the end of racial segregation. Other than that, during Nelson Mandela's longtime imprisonment, Winnie Mandela, Albertina Sisulu and the Black Sash Movement, led by Jean Sinclair and Sheena Duncan, along with others, kept resistance to apartheid alive within South Africa. There is also Aung Saan Syu Kyi from Myanmar, whose sacrifices have become the focus of the democratic cause in her country.¹ Among all the challenges facing humankind

in the 21st century, few are more pressing on climate change and global warming. Unfortunately, as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature has pointed out, most of the climate debate has so far been gender-blind. Yet women have played a special role in raising environmental consciousness. Whether in promoting conservation, combating climate change, protecting biodiversity and vital ecosystems, securing water access, or reducing indoor air pollution, women are developing and effecting innovative solutions to critical environmental problems. This should come as no surprise.² Studies show that it is women who are often most affected by the increased frequency of extreme weather events wrought by climate change. It is women who frequently spend half their days trekking long distances to collect water and fuel wood. It is women who represent the majority of the world's small-holder farmers and who face the disproportionate burden of food insecurity. Women clearly have a stake in the future of the environment and are taking action.³

The first recorded instance of a woman trying to safeguard the environment relates to about 300 years ago when, in Rajasthan, India, a woman Amrita Devi protested to the felling of trees for building a palace for the Maharaja of Jodhpur. She died in the attempt, which was followed by large-scale protests by the local villagers. As the story goes, the king promised never again to ask the local villagers to supply timber. Amrita Devi belonged to the Bishnoi community, which is known for its love of nature. The Chipko Movement involved hundreds of women who hugging trees to prevent them from being felled by local contractors working for the government. The movement picked up momentum in the mid 1970s, mainly under the leadership of Gaura Devi, a 50-year old illiterate woman. In Japan,

in the 1950s, the Nakabaru Women's Society and Sanroku Women's Society protested strongly against pollution from industries and power plants in the Tobata region. This resulted in major pollution prevention measures taken by the local government and corporations.

In Brazil, the women's organization Acao Democratic Feminina Gaucha (ADFG) was founded in 1964. Its main objective was to promote social change for equal opportunities, but since 1974 it became actively involved in environment protection, mainly through protests against chemical-based agriculture, and lobbying for environmental protection laws.

In Thailand, Tunjai Deetes helped found the Hill Area Development Foundation, which has initiated sustainable development efforts in 28 villages of five tribal groups. As a result of her leadership and dedication, many of the hill tribes have developed into self-reliant communities that now serve as national models in sustainable agriculture and resource conservation⁵

Another movement, which is one of the biggest in women and environment history, is the Green Belt movement. Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai founded this movement on the World Environment Day in June 1977. The starting ceremony was very simple: a few women planted seven trees in Maathai's backyard. By 2005, 30 million trees had been planted by participants in the Green Belt movement on public and private lands. The Green Belt movement aims to bring environmental restoration along with society's economic growth. This movement led by Maathai focused on restoration of Kenya's rapidly diminishing forests as well as empowering the rural women through environmental preservation, with a special emphasis on planting indigenous trees.⁶

Habiba Sarabi, the governor of Bamiyan Province and the first female governor in Afghanistan, created her country's first national park, Band-e Amir, protecting 220 square miles of pristine lakes and limestone canyons. Her work has inspired local communities to join her environmental efforts.

Mavanza from Tanzania has helped hundreds of Tanzanian women start environmentally sustainable businesses through microcredit loans and by providing training in accounting.

Albina Ruiz and her organization, Ciudad Saludable, have for over 20 years helped communities in Peru manage and recycle garbage, leading to cleaner environments, better health for women and children, and small business opportunities. India and other countries are now looking to Peru as a model. "Squads," groups of women environmental activists in southern

Bangladesh, have banded together to form patrols to protect endangered forests from loggers.⁷

Mei Ng was born in Hong Kong, China has worked diligently to promote environmental awareness throughout China. Her message of sustainability and eco-friendliness has reached nearly 860,000 people in 15 provinces. Mei Ng is an advocate of responsible consumption, renewable energy utilization, and sustainable development through the women and youth of China. She previously held the position of Director for Friends of the Earth in Hong Kong, an environmental organization which seeks to encourage environmental protection in China.⁸ Mei Ng strives to mobilize women to defend the environment and to bring environmental education to all parts of China. She founded the Earth Station, Hong Kong's first renewable energy education center and has been well received by policy makers and citizens alike.

An influential leader in developing nation environmentalism is Vandana Shiva, born on November 5, 1952 in India. Vandana Shiva is a world-renown environmental scholar.⁹ As a physicist-environmentalist adhering to ecofeminism, She has published numerous papers on the unequal burden placed on women by environmental degradation, stating that women and children "bore the costs but were excluded from the benefits" of development. Vandana Shiva is also an active voice for localized, organic agriculture and she began a movement entitled Navdanya where participating Indian farmers have created 'freedom zones' to keep their crops free of chemicals to revitalize an organic food market in India.¹⁰

Maria Cherkasova (1938 -) is a journalist, ecologist, and director of Centre for Independent Ecological Programmers (CIEP). She is famous because of coordinating a 4-year campaign to stop construction of hydro-electric dam on the Katun River. After Cherkasova's involvement in the student movement on environmental protection in 1960's, she began to work for the Red Data Book for the Department of Environmental Protection Institute. In 1990, she became director of CIEP, which arrange and drives activities in an extensive range of ecologically related areas on both domestic and international fronts. Cherkasova recently has shifted her focus on children rights protection to live in a healthy environment and speaks for both inside and outside Russia.¹¹

One of the outstanding women environmentalists is Rachel Carson. Rachel Carson (1907-1964) was a scientist, writer, and ecologist. That is she who wrote her book about environment, Silent Spring. The book was about what man has done to the nature and eventually to himself, and started a modern

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environmental movement. Carson believed that human and nature are mutually dependent on each other. She argued that industrial activities such as pesticides use can damages the earth ecosystem and will have far-reaching ecological consequences such as future human health problems. Today, scientific studies have demonstrated these consequences.¹²

Conclusion:-

Women have been visible figures leading the environmentalist movement in many of its aspects. Rachel Carson, Dian Fossey, Wangari Maathai, Jane Goodall, Amrita Devi and many more are well known for their observations about the natural world and their contributions to saving a world that is safe for people and their primate cousins to live in. Even, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change's Secretariat in December 2008 stressed that "women are important actors" and "agents of change" in environment protection.

A lot studies on women and environment have shown that women are significant actors in natural resources management and they are major contributors to environment rehabilitation and conversation. In addressing some key environmental problems, women play a dominant role. Women, through their roles as farmers and collectors of water and firewood, have a

close connection with their local environment and often suffer most directly from environmental problems.

Women's direct contact with environment has produced their deep knowledge about the environment. Thus, women have served as agriculturalists, water resources managers, and traditional scientists, among others. Women are not only knowledgeable about the environment; they are also protective and caring. Thus, there is need to enhancing the role of women in protecting the environment is necessary.

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 adverse affects on income, nutrition, health, social support networks and domestic knowledge. Practically being close to nature, women are always able to realize environmental issues better. Since women are the prospective users of the facilities, it is necessary to consider their views in planning to save the environment and implementing projects for the same.

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