

# **Salt Satyagraha to the Chipko Movement: Ecofeminist Readings of Women's Mobilization on Resource Politics in India**

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## **Abstract**

Ecofeminism, a significant development in the field of Political theory since the 1970s, offers a fresh and unique vantage point for re-evaluating certain events in the colonial past of India and offers a premise on which the engagement of women with politics can be increased. This paper seeks to retrospectively examine the Salt Satyagraha of 1930 as not just an anti-colonial movement but also as a nascent ecofeminist assertion as it involved large-scale female participation to resist capitalist patriarchy encapsulated by colonialism and its tendency of privatization and monopolization of natural resources like salt. The Salt Satyagraha has then been compared and contrasted with the Chipko Movement of 1973 to bring forth their shared ecofeminist underpinnings and key divergences. Finally, this paper makes a case for revisiting the ideals of ecofeminism for increasing the participation of Indian women in the political processes, particularly by positioning women as natural advocates and leaders

for fair resource management and challenging the cultural barriers that inhibit women's political agency.

**Keywords:** *Salt Satyagraha, Chipko Movement, Ecofeminism, Women's political participation, Anticolonial feminism*

### **Introduction: Ecofeminism in India and Abroad.**

Ecofeminism is a relatively recent development in the field of political theory. It is classified as both a movement as well as a theory that postulates that there is a close connection between women and nature, in the way both are perceived as being nurturing and also in the context of their exploitation. It found its beginning in tandem with the second wave of feminism and the green movement in the mid 1970s. Ecofeminism performed the dual task of combining the ideals of feminist and ecological movements and also of critiquing some of their aspects. Thus, Ecofeminism draws on the green movements for highlighting the impacts of indiscriminate human use of the natural world and from feminism it adopts a critique of the gendered perspective of humankind that oppresses, exploits, and subjugates women (Mellor, 1997).

The seventh decade of the twentieth century has been crucial for the discourse of Ecofeminism. It was in 1974 that 'Ecofeminism' as a term was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne and it was in this decade itself that one of the most vivid Ecofeminist movements, the Chipko movement occurred predating the coining of the term. In 1973, 27 women of the Chamoli district of Uttarakhand led by Gaura Devi stood up to forest loggers by embracing trees of the Reni forest to prevent their felling (Shiva, 1989). This came to be known as the historic Chipko movement, an explicitly Ecofeminist endeavour, which became a precedent for various "angalwaltha" movements led by women in different parts of India. The latter part of 1970 also saw the Green Belt movement in Kenya and Love Canal movement in New York which made women visible stakeholders in environmental concerns and solutions (Salman & Iqbal, 2007).

Finally, the 1970s was also the decade when global attention was captured by several studies that revealed that ecological issues like global warming, food crisis, nuclear contamination etc. were having a disproportionately larger impact on women and other marginalised groups. Subsequent studies have built upon the findings to indicate a link between reproductive health and

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environmental degradation (Gaard, 2010). Such awareness brought women to the helm of environmental movements and increased their political assertion and presence, giving an impetus to the discourse of Ecofeminism.

‘Ecofeminism’ as a term was coined by Françoise d’Eaubonne in 1974. Eaubonne asserted that the oppression of women and other marginalised groups is intrinsically linked to the degradation of the natural world, both purportedly arising as a result of patriarchal dominance (d’Eaubonne, 1974/2022). Simply put, ecofeminism is a brand of feminism that establishes a connection between nature and women. The radical/cultural strand of ecofeminism attributes this closeness between the two to the biological roles (such as pregnancy, lactation and menstruation) and gender roles as family nurturers and food providers assigned to women. This makes women more sensitive to environmental degradation as this has a direct bearing on their ability to discharge their biological and gender roles. Thus, cultural ecofeminists make a case for valuing this sensitivity as it is life affirming (Carlassare, 2000). The radical ecofeminist regards this association between nature and women as a construction by the capitalist patriarchy to control and exploit both (Plumwood, 1993). On the other hand, the Socialist Ecofeminist focuses on the material realities like the undervaluation of labor done by women and similarly the devaluation of ecological resources citing capitalism and patriarchy as the common oppressors of women (Salleh, 1997). Mies and Shiva (2014) hold the capitalist-patriarchal perspective as the subjugator of women and the environment through its tendency of favoring uniformity over difference and by placing differences in a hierarchal order. For instance, nature, women and Global South is considered as being on the lower hierarchical rung vis-à-vis profit, men and Global North respectively. This hierarchy legitimizes the exploitation of the latter at the hands of former. In this context technology and reductionist modern science also assumes an exploitative dimension (Mies & Shiva, 2014)

While the Chipko Movement of 1973 has been regarded as a pioneer movement for ecofeminism in India and abroad, it drew its legitimacy and strength from the fact that respect for nature has been deeply rooted in the ethics and history of the Indian subcontinent. Right from the Harappan civilisation, where the discovery of the Pashupati seal and the statue of Mother goddess is indicative of nature worship to the Bishnoi movement where Amrita Devi of the Bishnoi tribe laid

down her life to prevent the felling of trees by the King of Jodhpur in 1730, the respect for the environment has been a central concern (Agoramoorthy & Hsu, 2011). Thus, this priority accorded to nature and its association with divinity is not merely a momentary attitude or a community's personal belief system but a systematic political attitude that has developed over time and permeated into the politics of India taking coherent forms like the Chipko movement (Shiva, 1989). With the developments in the field of contemporary political theory, the lens of ecofeminism offers an alternative framework to analyse some of the episodes of modern Indian history such as the Dandi March of 1930 and tribal movements of the eighteenth century and demonstrate that the Ecofeminist underpinnings were present in Indian politics much before the 1970s.

### **Ecofeminism in Colonial India: The Salt Satyagraha**

In 1930, Mahatma Gandhi decided to launch a Civil Disobedience Movement against British colonial rule in India (Chandra, et al., 2016). Along with the boycott of British goods, breaking immoral rules was going to be a central strategy and Gandhi chose to target an oppressive Salt Law which gave the British a monopoly over salt production and also imposed a heavy tax on the purchase of Salt. The objective behind selecting this Act for the purposes of registering civil disobedience can be understood as being threefold: This Act was considered highly immoral as salt, a most basic mineral and ingredient, that was otherwise abundantly available in nature were rendered inaccessible or extremely expensive to the majority of poor Indians. Further, the selection of salt served to unite disparate and diverse strata of Indian society as salt is a universal kitchen ingredient consumed by all households regardless of their socio-economic standing and religious affiliations (Suchitra, 1995). But perhaps the most important segment of the population to be integrated into the national movement was that of women. Ordinary women, until then had played an instrumental role in the national movement but had done so usually from the margins and perhaps many of their contributions went undocumented. However, the Salt Satyagraha visibilised the assertion and participation of women.

While there had been the participation of women even before 1930, it was the salt march that serves as a watershed period because earlier the participation of women was limited in terms of scale, method and purpose while after and during

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the Salt Satyagraha the participation of women started en masse (Chatterjee, 2001). Prior to 1930, there were renowned figures like Rani Lakshmi Bai and Begum Hazrat Mahal of the Revolt of 1857, Sarla Debi Ghoshal was credited with the formation of Bharat Sri Mandal in 1910 and for patronising Akharas, Annie Besant for the presidentship of Congress and Home Rule League, and Madam Bhikaji Cama for advocating armed struggle for India's liberation (Chatterjee, 2001). The participation was limited in terms of number and spread with most women being the relatives of Congress leaders. But after 1930 women's participation became more broad-based and women from all walks of life, from cities to villages participated as a united mass, as equals and empowered members of a nation (Chatterjee, 2001).

Kamala Chattopadhyay (1983) has regarded the Salt Satyagraha as a special turning point in human history as well as the independence struggle for politically mobilizing women who were so far concerned mostly with their domestic responsibility. A simple unassuming ingredient like salt became the mobilizing plank for the women surprisingly because of the otherwise debilitating gendered responsibility in the kitchen. Owing to gender roles, matters of the kitchen were considered a women's domain and thus salt, a very essential ingredient of the Indian kitchen, provided an effective entry point to women in the then politics of colonial struggle (Kishwar, 1985). The availability and cost of salt were of very direct concern to the Indian woman tasked with the job of running a cost-effective kitchen. Here the connections with Ecofeminism may be established. Ecofeminism postulates that women tend to bear a larger proportion of the burden of ecological degradation or indiscriminate consumption of natural resources than men. In order to illustrate, let us consider the contemporary case of a water-stressed village in Maharashtra called Danganmal where women have to walk long distances to fetch water for domestic use. This process can be so time taking and backbreaking for women that they are unable to discharge their other domestic responsibilities. As a response, men of the village have taken to polygamy, as one wife is insufficient to run the household optimally (Crowder, 2015). According to studies, gender disparities are exacerbated by climate-related risks, which cause increased workloads for women, occupational risks both indoors and outdoors, emotional and psychological stress, and higher mortality relative to men (Crowder, 2015).

Ecofeminist arguments are cognisant of these realities and resist the extractive and arbitrary attitudes and policies concerning natural resources as they tend to have tangible and higher costs for women. Thus, the Salt Satyagraha too can be said to be premised on Ecofeminist thought where women asserted control over the decision-making concerning natural resources (salt in this case) and resisted laws they considered exploitative, extractive and indiscriminate.

For the early part of the colonial struggle, women were seen as secondary actors whose main concern continued to be their family but after Dandi women began to view themselves as having agency, as being equal partners in the colonial movement (Chatterjee, 2001). It is important to note that while the salt march initially excluded women, it was Sarojini Naidu's unrelenting persuasion of Gandhi that women were not only involved but eventually became instrumental in carrying forward the movement. Kasturba Gandhi led 37 women Satyagrahis from Sabarmati, Sarojini Naidu and Manilal Gandhi initiated a raid on Dharsana Salt Works and Kamaladevi on Wadala salt work respectively (Kishwar, 1985). Women were engaged not only in the process of producing salt but also in the processes of buying and selling. Various women organisations like the Desh Sevika Sangh, Nari Satyagraha Samiti, Ladies Picketing Board etc. worked to make the movement a success (Chatterjee, 2001). The watershed monumentality of the Salt Satyagraha can be gleaned from the fact that women participation in the independence struggle did not frizzle out after the salt satyagraha but rather took diverse shape and kept evolving and continuing. Even common women, of different age and social standing contributed in their unique ways, individually and collectively as a precedent had been set. Earlier confined in domestic spaces, women entered the public sphere courageously picketing outside shops selling liquor, opium and foreign goods and using the force of moral suasion to erode the British hegemony (Chandra et al., 2016).

Yet, it must be borne in mind that the involvement of women was accepted by Gandhi and others as the women's participation was seen as a continuation of the essentialized nature of the Indian women -self-sacrificing and devoted to the family as here nation was defined as a larger family (Seth, 2013). Gandhi viewed women as an embodiment of strength which was rooted in non-violence and acknowledges that he had developed his method of passive resistance in some measure as inspiration from his mother and wife (Kishwar, 1985). He was aware that women's presence in the movement would also minimise the

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possibility of a repeat of the violence of Chauri Chaura which was the cause of the failure of the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1921 (Kishwar, 1985). Women of colonial India were seen to inhabit the 'inner' social space (*ghar*), this inner domain composed of family, spirituality, and core identity as opposed to the 'outer' social space (*bahir*) of the male-dominated material world which was the site of colonial suppression and resistance (Chatterjee, 1989). But with the Salt Satyagraha, the women could extend this inner domain to subsume a part of the outer domain thus blurring the dichotomies of the "inner/outer", "spiritual/material" or "*ghar/ bhahir*". The women used the rationale of the betterment of family, food provisioning and redefinition of the nation as a family to enter the material domain of politics. Of course, women could eventually transcend these essentialized roles and contributed in more militant and alternative capacities to the national movement as illustrated by the valiant contributions of Sumati Morarjee, Matangini Hazara, Usha Mehta, Bina Das, Suhasini Ganguly etc. In fact, post-1930 the militant strand of nationalism also absorbed more women such as Shanti Ghosh and Suniti Chaudhuri who assassinated a district magistrate in 1931, Bina Das who made an attempt on the life of the Governor of Bengal, her elder sister Kalyani Das courted arrest, and Pritilata Waddadar and Kalpana Dutt boldly led raids in Chittagong. (Chatterjee, 2001). Thus, we find the Salt Satyagraha that flagged off the civil disobedience mobilised women by connecting a natural resource and culinary ingredient of the kitchen to the larger issue of national subjugation. This enhanced participation of women in the anti-colonial struggle of India persisted well into the Quit India Movement of 1942 and women also contributed actively as members of Azad Hind Fauj.

### **Comparison and Contrast between Salt Satyagraha and Chipko movement.**

The argument here is that while Salt Satyagraha was not an ecological movement, it was a movement for fair resource management rooted in material sustenance issue of accessing affordable salt, an indispensable ingredient in Indian cooking, wherein women participated in large numbers (Thapar-Björkert, 2006). Ariel Salleh (1997) regards the ecofeminist focus on ecology as more nuanced from the biocentric position of 'environmentalism for environment's sake', as promoted by deep ecology but rather also incorporates considerations of social justice and fairness. Thus, the aspect of fair use of natural resources is present in the aims of Salt Satyagraha.



Further, Vandana Shiva regarded colonialism as the embodiment of capitalist patriarchy which disrupted the tradition of harmony (Shakti) between nature (Prakriti) and culture (Purusha) inherent in the philosophy of the Indian subcontinent since times immemorial (Shiva, 1989). Thus, the Salt Satyagraha, in its act of resisting colonial extraction, assumes within itself the objectives of ecofeminism of resisting capitalist patriarchy.

Ecofeminism in the Indian subcontinent has been regarded as distinct from the western conceptualizations of ecofeminism on the grounds of being materially rooted in caste, class and race whereas the western interpretations focus on ideological and symbolic association between nature and women based on Cartesian dualisms of Culture vs Nature, Male vs Female etc. (Plumwood, 1993). Bina Agarwal (1992) asserts that women find themselves closer to nature because of their gender roles of catering to domestic upkeep and food provisioning for which women become directly reliant on nature. She does acknowledge the extent of this dependence on nature is conditioned by factors of caste, class and race. The arguments of Agarwal (1992) and Shiva (1989) connect well with the retrospective analysis of Salt Satyagraha as a form of ecofeminist assertion where the material realities of colonized Indian women compelled them to show solidarity against monopolistic salt laws which sought to privatize and commercialize a naturally abundant resource.

Forty-three years later, in 1973 the Chipko movement emerged, which was hailed as one of the most iconic ecofeminist movement globally. The aims of Chipko Movement were overtly ecofeminist in the sense that women were seen mobilizing against deforestation which had a direct bearing upon the environment and also on the women of the region as they would have to undergo more drudgery to source firewood, fodder and water in degraded ecosystems. Yet Guha (1989) and Agarwal (1992) contend that it was also a livelihood issue and an anti-liquor movement, showing that sustenance and social justice are important factors in ecofeminist movement that cannot be overlooked. This aspect of focus on sustenance issues, social justice and fair use of natural resource, namely salt, was also present in the Salt Satyagraha, as was largescale participation of women. Thus, Salt Satyagraha and Chipko Movement differ in time period, immediate aims and degree of focus on the environment but share common ecofeminist underpinnings and similar methods specifically, through women solidarity against commercialization of nature (Salt in salt satyagraha;



trees in Chipko) and through peaceful morally persuasive non-cooperation.

### **Lessons for the Present**

After independence, Indian politics has been characterised by the low participation of women. With Gandhian politics giving way to Nehruvian consensus, democratic electoral politics has come to dominate the stage. A gender gap has been observed with respect to women's political participation as voters, party candidates and representation in the Parliament and state legislature remains low (Khanna, 2009). Despite reaching a high of 14.39% as of June 2019, India's representation of women in parliament is still worse than that of 140 other nations. The percentage of women in parliaments around the world was 24.6% on average (Sen, 2019). Several reasons have been identified for the low participation of women and can be classified into psychological variables such as the perception that politics is not an appropriate domain for women, socio-economic variables which include limited access to primary goods and political variables for example, the reluctance of parties to provide party tickets to women (Khanna, 2009). While a holistic treatment of all the variables is required to improve women's political participation with the aid of suitable interventions like reservations for women, and socio-economic schemes for women empowerment, it is a priority to overcome the psychological variables as well. Politics is and has been, especially in the cultural context of Indian history, the arena for women too. The feminist assertion that private is political is made clearly manifest through ecofeminism as was demonstrated by the resounding success of the Civil disobedience movement in involving women in the colonial struggle.

The Cultural Ecofeminist underpinnings in the Indian subcontinent's history render women and politics as intimately linked and the distinction between the inner and outer domain or the cultural and material world begins to blur. Women's political assertion after independence has taken the form of issue-based activism and extra-parliamentary politics such as protesting against rising prices, violence against women, and liquor consumption. Ecofeminism has also been leveraged as a plank to mobilise the people of Chamoli through the Chipko movement, the Bhopal gas tragedy, the Appiko movement, and Narmada Bachao Andolan. Yet, such participation is localised, and individual-based and rarely translates into coherent long-term policymaking. The reservations for

women provided in local bodies have demonstrated the ample capacity women have as political decision-makers. The value of ecofeminism in this situation lies in providing women with an entry in terms of psychological acceptance to electoral politics as well.

## Conclusion

The traditions of Ecofeminism and Ecomasculinities have been present in India's colonial political history and have continued to provide political undertones to events in post-independent India which need to be reinvestigated with these perspectives. Women face tremendous cultural barriers in terms of participating in politics and many of such barriers arise from the assumption that women should limit their interest to the domestic sphere. While there has been immense socio-economic progress of women over the last century yet with the continuing evidence of 'Proxy Pati' or 'Sarpanch Pati' in Panchayati Raj Institutions (Pandey, 2016), the limited presence of women in decision making roles, and lower voter turnouts leave much to be desired. In such a situation, the idea of ecofeminism can provide a basis for enhancing the assertion of women in political processes, as was done in the Dandi March. This enhanced access will, in turn, have tremendous positive spinoff for the nation as a whole since the increased presence of women in parliaments and decision-making bodies, as in the case of Norway, has been seen to be more environmentally conscious and inclusive (Norgaard & York, 2005). With the passing of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023) providing for reservation of 33% seats for women in parliament and state assemblies, awaiting implementation post delimitation, leveraging of ecofeminist ideals assumes even more significance as it can give women ideological grounding and an indicative priority list of interlinked political issues of resource management, ecological conservation and gender empowerment that can be taken up by Female Indian politicians and representatives to function as effective and viable political actors.

It must be acknowledged that the mere entry or acceptance of women into politics though necessary, is not sufficient. The efforts to politically empower women through education, health access, employment and training opportunities, affirmative action must continue with full vigour to prevent tokenism with respect to feminist concerns or environmental issues. With that in mind, it is

just as important to appreciate and understand the Ecofeminist sensibilities that have conditioned the Indian way of life from time immemorial and use it as a powerful premise to take our nation ahead.

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### **Ethical Considerations**

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