A History of Ecofeminist-Socialist Resistance to Eco-crisis in India

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Abstract

This article traces the history of women's environmental activism in India after independence. The earliest organizing efforts came from women from indigenous communities who wanted to collectively push back against government and private encroachments into communal lands. From the 1970s to the late 1980s, ecofeminism became a dominant paradigm to analyze and respond to environmental issues globally. Indian feminists adapted the model to analyzing ecological issues locally while also pushing back against its essentialism and its blindness to social and economic inequities. Indian eco(feminist) socialists demanded a centering of the voices of the most vulnerable communities in environmental movements. In the 1990s, the economic liberalization of India slowed the energy of women organizing around ecological issues. Even as the country became increasingly polluted and prone to disasters related to climate change, there was very little public discussion on ecological justice, in fact, middle-class environmentalism began to dominate the public space. Today, there is an urgent need for an ecological paradigm that centers social justice, in other words, a revival of an environmentalism of the poor. The alternative is an unsustainable, unlivable world.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Ecosocialism, Indians Women's Environmental Involvement History, Environmentalism of the Poor, Environmental history.

Introduction: Post-Independence Indian Environmentalism

Since the early years of British colonialism, Indian leaders have written about the horrors of unmitigated industrial expansion. This phenomenon picked up strength in the first few decades of the 1900s (Guha, 1997; 2014). For instance, Mohanlal Karamchand Gandhi wrote about the evils of industrial development, especially one that mimicked European growth and that exhibited little regard for the many species and other human communities that inhabited the land already scarred through centuries of colonization. His protégé Meera Behn proclaimed that the path for India was in rejecting the unsustainable models of development exhibited by the nations of the Global North; instead, it lay in charting its own path that focused on meeting the needs of the local population without destroying the environment (Gupta, 1993). After India's independence she was given forest lands to manage in a sustainable fashion by the Uttar Pradesh government. She led the newly independent Indian government's push to establish sustainable agriculture and livestock farming in the foothills of the Himalayas. She was one of the first of a long line of

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women who played a crucial role in connecting women's wellbeing with environmental health (Kumar, 2002). Today Meera Behn is featured in the list of women who played a pioneering role in the field of forestry. Presaging the modern environmental movement, she wrote:

> "You cannot separate economic problems from human ones......Look at what is happening now: wrong cultivation, mechanization in villages causing unemployment and hopeless disorientation… But to stop the death of the forest, for example, would require a bold reorientation by the central Government: the decision to put financial advantages at the bottom and protection of trees and soil at the top". (Sereny, 1982, page 70)

After independence in 1947, India resembled most of the early postcolonial nations in attempting to shake off the yoke of centuries of colonial oppression. In its zeal to advance industrially, its leaders attempted to mimic European and North American models of economic growth, subsuming environmental issues to focus on national economic concerns (Maudsley, 1998). In the west however, the large-scale negative impacts of massive industrialization, insensitive to ecological ruptures, was becoming evident. One of the earliest texts to explore the issue of the grave dangers posed by environmental destruction was *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson published in 1962. Carson's book accused the pesticide industry of hiding the long-term devastating impact that pesticides have on human life and habitat. While Carson did not argue for outright banning of many of these pesticides, her scientific observations inspired early environmentalists to collectively organize to push back against policies with the potential for negative ecological impacts (Carson, 2002).

The Rise of Ecofeminism in the Global North

Ecofeminism as a framework to understand and respond to the crisis of the Anthropocene arose in the 1970s, as part of the radical traditions for justice in the United States (Gaard, 2010; Gaard, 2017; Salleh, 2017). While communities around the world were already organizing against the ill-effects of rampant environmental degradation, ecofeminism offered a novel way to explore exploitation. With the rise of the civil rights movements in the 1960s and 70s, feminists began to be increasingly concerned with the connections between war, corporatism, environmental destruction, and gendered oppression. A new generation of activists began to call for the dismantling of patriarchy to address ecological destruction. Collectively, these resistance movements began to be self-labelled as ecofeminist, with the connections between class, gender, race/caste, and the ecology being centered for analysis (Estévez-Saá, & Lorenzo-Modia, 2018). The term itself was coined by Francoise de' Eaubonne (1974). While there were grassroots protests environment destruction before her, she articulated a new theory that made an explicit connection between feminism and environmental justice:

> "Practically everybody knows that today the two most immediate threats to survival are overpopulation and the destruction of our resources; fewer recognize the complete responsibility of the male system, in so far as it is male (and not capitalistic or socialistic) in these two dangers;" (Gates, 1977, page 9)

The first ecofeminist conference was held in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1980. Over the next several decades, the importance of the ecofeminist movement was highlighted by the rapid

pace of profit-driven technological advancement and its accompanying destruction of ecologies everywhere – new forms of genetically modified crops fueled by the rise of terminator seeds, new instruments of war, increasingly potent pesticides and insecticides, vast amounts of waste products piling up and polluting the air, earth, and water where people live (Warren, 2000; Zakarriya, 2020). When women activists explored these new powerful technologies with the potential to alter the world, they repeatedly observed that it was intimately tied to patriarchy, war and safeguarding the enormous profits of corporations (Gaard, 2010; Warren, 2000). The first generation of ecofeminists concluded that oppression of nature and exploitation of women went hand in hand. Feminists at the conference declared that environmental matters were feminist issues (Gaard, 1993). One of the conference participants Patsy Hallen declared:

> *"Ecofeminism proposes that the domination of women and the domination of nature are not only intimately connected but mutually reinforcing". (Jenkins, 1995)*

The emphasis of ecofeminism on exploring the domination of nature and women by patriarchy, led to new ways of unpacking the processes through which the domination takes place. One of the fundamental splits that ecofeminists point to is that of humans and nature. In modern capitalist societies, humans are equated with men while nature is equated with women. Thus, both nature and women are robbed of their creative and life-giving force and treated as objects from whom value can be extracted. This according to ecofeminism has had a terrible consequence in terms of ecological destruction and irreversible climate change (Shiva & Mies, 2014). For ecofeminists, to ensure a sustainable future for the earth and its inhabitants, it is important to repair the split between humans and nature, man and woman which can only be done by stopping the molding of nature for profit and exploitation (Warren, Warren & Erkal, 1997).

Over the next few decades ecofeminism branched off into several sub-movements, the different branches reflecting the various feminisms that the movements were embedded within. The liberal ecofeminists who typically tended to come from communities of privilege emphasized reform and increased regulations to address environmental issues (Cuomo, 1992). Ecofeminists of the liberal persuasion believed that while there were looming social, health and economic issues tied to ecological damage, the solution was not fundamental economic transformations but introduction of new rules and policies that addressed specific ecological problems. Radical ecofeminists on the other hand, proclaimed that women had always had a much more intimate relationship with nature as compared to men and called for a strengthening of these intrinsic bonds (Warren, Warren & Erkal, 1997). Radical ecofeminists denied that science and reason were useful tools to ameliorate the threat of ecological destruction and demanded a movement to empower women. The most recent group and perhaps most impactful group of ecofeminists were socialists and they criticized feminisms that highlighted women's special relationship with nature as being essentialist and unhelpful in analyzing the factors that contribute to ecological destruction. Eco (feminist)socialists argued for centering exploitation within capitalism in analyzing environmental destruction. Ecofeminist-socialists argued that capitalism relegated to men, all the productive activities of the economy and relegated to women, the social reproductive activities of society, thereby creating a split that made the maintenance of the system unsustainable (Finlan, 2021). Carolyn Merchant, an early eco socialist argued:

"In investigating the roots of our current environmental dilemma, and its connections to science, technology and the economy, we must re-examine the formation of a world-view and a science that by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism, sanctioned the domination of both nature and women…decentralized, non-hierarchical forms of organization, recycling of wastes, simpler forms of living involving less polluting forms of soft technology and labor intensive rather than capital intensive are possibilities only now beginning to be explored" (Merchant, 1990, page 9).

Thus, the ideas that unify ecofeminist thought is the belief that organizing and empowering women is key to bringing about a change in government policies regarding ecological destruction. According to ecofeminists and eco-socialists, one key step to reversing environmental catastrophe is the abolition of gendered hierarchies and the organizing and empowering of women for a sustainable world.

Critiques Against Ecofeminism from the Global South
The rising popularity of ecofeminism as a movement was accompanied by critiques against the framework and its roots in the countries of the Global North. South Asian women formed the front line of this critique; they pointed to ecofeminism as a framework that was blind to local context and the intersections of class, caste, and geography (Agarwal, 1998; Rao, 2012). The critics point to how the notion that somehow women are closer to nature than men, simply reifies traditional stereotypes of women as having mystical animal-like qualities and does little to further analysis in this area. These images of women also portray women as being identical across cultural contexts with little regard to differences in status. Thus, the actual impacts of environmental destruction on women are obfuscated and smoothed over without accounting for privilege based on the social locations of women in different contexts. The Ecosocialist strain of feminism found popularity in the countries of the Global South. It centers capitalist patriarchy in its framework for exploring oppression. In India, through the 70s to the 90s, eco(feminist) socialism became the dominant paradigm for feminists to analyze and organize for reversing ecological decay which in turn manifested itself in community distress (Nanda, 1997; 2018).

Ecofeminism and Ecosocialism in India
India has always felt itself vulnerable to changes in global climate systems. The long seacoasts make it vulnerable to the rise in sea levels. Over the last few decades, parts of South Asia have endured desertification while other regions continue to experience yearly floods that have drowned out communities. Since Indian independence, food and water insecurity has become increasingly common with only a few glacially fed rivers that the country depends on. Indian women have repeatedly faced the brunt of these negative ecological stresses. As a result, they have historically taken a remarkably active leadership role operating within a traditional system in resistance movements demanding environmental justice (Agarwal, 1998). In fact, women's role in giving birth to children and their role as protectors of 'nature' assumed a natural connection in myth and reality. Generations of women have reached into mythological archetypes and traditional practices to establish their credibility as protectors of nature (Suresh, 2021; Tøllefsen, 2011). For instance, an early pioneer of forest preservation Saalumarada Thimmakka, is reported to have said that she started planting trees after she was spurned for not having children. Today, the 106-year-old Thimmakka is hailed as the mother of trees (Beevi, 2018).

The Chipko Movement

Early in the struggle women's role as ecological leaders in fishing regions and in forest communities was to simply preserve the resources that were sustaining local communities. Some of the pioneering women environmentalists predated the proper articulation and global spread of ecofeminism as a framework even though today they have been adopted by feminists as part of their historical lore. One such major landmark movement was the 'Chipko movement' which began in the Garhwal region in the Himalayas. The local indigenous community relied on gathering and subsistence farming. In the 1970s, the Indian government began to lease parcels of this land to contractors to feed the nation's need for construction materials. There was little consultation with the local community and the governmental actions led to deforestation, consequent floods, and a huge financial stress on the local communities. Indigenous protests were ignored by the forest department which continued to award trees to a company making sporting goods. The women of the community who felt this negative change the most, decided to take matters into their own hands and hug the trees that were allotted for cutting until the loggers departed. They were led by a local woman leader, Gaura Devi. While none of the participants in the protest identified as an ecofeminist and they were mostly concerned about their own sustainability as a community and less by the larger environmental implications of their actions, the 'Chipko Movement' inspired environmental justice activists globally and provided a model for future resistance within India (Sen, 2020; Sharma, 2021). Gaura Devi's words reflect the very essence of the ecofeminist centering of women's capacities to protect our natural world.

> *The forest nurtures us like a mother; you will only be able to use your axes on it,*
> *but you have to use them first on us.* (Chopra, 2019)

While the Chipko movement is the most well-known resistance endeavor led by women in that period in India, there were several other environmental movements throughout India in the 1970s and into the 1980s. The Indian government had embarked on a massive development and industrialization push that forced the most vulnerable communities into unsustainable spaces and out of the lands that they had lived on for centuries (Swain, 1997). There was conflict over community resources such as land, rivers, seacoasts, and forests between government favored private interests and the communities themselves. In that respect, much of the early environmental organizing in India happened among the poorest and the most marginalized communities, unlike in the west where the middle-class formed the prominent leadership within environmental movements (Gadgil & Guha, 1994). Most of the Indian ecological struggles post-independence, involved the very survival of these vulnerable communities. After the success of the Chipko movement, in 1980, a department of environment was established by the government of Indira Gandhi and there was talk of returning control of local resources to local governing bodies (Sharma, 2021).

The Narmada Bachao Andolan

In the 1980s one significant environmental struggle that raised serious doubts about the miracles promised by runaway economic development and its consequences was the *Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Struggle)*. After the Indian independence from the British, the successive congress governments emphasized the importance of introducing large industrial projects to address the problem of the underdevelopment of India. As part of this push, the resources of the state were galvanized to ensure adequate electricity to fuel the massive growth

that was needed to sustain the population (Rana, Sati, Sundriyal, Doval, & Juyal, 2007). The framework used to guide this work was technocratic and local communities were rarely consulted before beginning massive projects, whether mining, hydroelectric power generation or setting up of nuclear plants. In fact, the overt policy of the government was that communities would have to make sacrifices for national progress (Gadgil & Guha, 1993)

One of the rivers targeted for a series of dam projects was the river Narmada; it flowed through several states. After some consultation, the Indian government decided to build several dams of varying heights through the river's meandering path. However, there were government reports circulating that predicted long negative environmental impacts as of the result of the dams under construction and the river being diverted at several points. In fact, the environmental impact report spelled out that it would have a disastrous consequence for local communities along the river's path. Medha Patkar, who was a faculty member of a prestigious university in Mumbai at that time was alerted to the problem and began organizing local communities to resist the dam project from going forth without further review and consultation (Dwivedi, 1997; Narula, 2009).

Patkar and her fellow resistance organizers began following the money for the dam projects and realized that much of it had been sanctioned by the World Bank without a thorough review of the ecological impacts of the project. The *Narmada Bachao Andolan* did not fashion itself as an environmental movement, but it was guided by critiques that questioned the imposition of development projects that did not come from below. Their method of resistance was borrowed from the non-violent freedom struggles advocated by Gandhi and involved galvanizing the consciousness of local communities along the Narmada, to stand up for their rights to their lands through civil disobedience (Rao, 2012). Even as communities were pushed out by the governmental project and arable lands flooded, people stood in the rising waters until they were forcibly removed. It was one of the most electrifying struggles for an inclusive democracy and it garnered the attention of environmental activists and writers like Arundhati Roy who wrote a powerful essay explaining how big dams are antithetical to inclusive growth (Dube, 2017).

Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, Patkar and others like her continued to work on other areas of environmental justice under the umbrella organization, the *National Alliance of People's Movements*. The founders of the organization realized that the ecological distress that communities were facing was a winning issue in collectively organizing people to address unequal runaway development that only benefited the rich and the wealthy (Passantino, 2017). While the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* had only mixed success in stopping the damming of Narmada, the struggle itself had come upon a formula for both grassroots mobilization and getting international attention on the extremely deleterious impact of big development projects that did not include the voices of the local communities who were affected. The World Bank itself pulled out of the project after the launch of the struggle and the organization was subjected to increased scrutiny regarding its international aid policies (Chaplin, 1996).

Vandana Shiva and Seed Democracy

Internationally, environmentalism in India is synonymous today with the name of Vandana Shiva; she is perhaps the only person in this list of female environmental activists who brands herself as an ecofeminist (Shiva & Mies, 2014). She rose to fame in the late 1980s with her critical writings on the new biotechnological innovations and bioengineering products introduced by some of the major pharmaceutical corporate entities based in the countries of the Global North. The green revolution had just been touted a success in Punjab and the countries of the Global South

were told that the future of their countries and their capacity to feed their population lay in implementing large-scale technological changes in agriculture (Salleh, 1991; 2017).

Shiva asserted and continues to assert, more than her other Indian environmental compatriots, that western science is to be rejected because of the violence inherent in its practice. She asserts that it has brought nothing but destruction to the Global South while enriching a few corporations located in the Global North (Vandana & Maria, 1993). She argues for an environmental movement rooted in our inalienable connections to nature, and the tradition of spirituality that has sustained the continent for a millennium (Lorentzen & Eaton, 2002). For her, biotechnology invariably leads to an assault on the integrity of local communities since these technologies only work on large-scale implementation. They are highly capital intensive, consequently resulting in monoculture crop production and a rapid deterioration of the soil. Thus, introducing these profit-driven changes would lead to increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of a few producers and a move away from food production to cash crops. For her, the assault on biodiversity was nothing but a sustained attack on women and their place in agricultural communities (Shiva, 2016). In her later writings she moved away from a traditional ecofeminist stand to outlining a more socialist framework for pushing back against destructive technology. In this connection, she also argued for slowing down the globalization of production and distribution, especially of agricultural products (Shiva, 2008). She has spearheaded several lawsuits against corporations like Monsanto and NGOs such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in their efforts to patent traditional Indian herbs and seeds. Her most noteworthy achievement was in seed diversity preservation and what she calls, *seed democracy*. Her *Navdanya Foundation* is involved in storing indigenous Indian seeds thereby preserving their diversity for centuries to come (Shiva, 2004).

It is hard to categorize Shiva's politics as purely one of ecofeminism; while she does connect environmental degradation to women's exploitation, she also writes fervently against European models of development. She reaches back to Indian traditional texts to historicize the meaning of the current environmental struggle to India's long tradition of revering nature. She draws inspiration in traditional Sanskrit scriptural writings regarding concepts such as wholeness and integrity as opposed to rationalist science that dissects and splits identities. This has led to criticism against her work by Indian ecofeminists who lean towards a more socialist class analysis of the ecological issues in India today. They detect in her writings, little discussion about historical social and economic inequities and their connections to ecocide (Kilby & Scholtz, 2011). While she writes fervently about the incursion of neocolonialism in Indian agriculture, she does not address the long history of the caste system and other forms of landlord oppression in India. She glorifies agriculture as an occupation but does little analysis on the factors that do not allow most Indian women to own their land for cultivation and keeps most agricultural communities impoverished and therefore vulnerable to corporate abuse (Hall, 1994; Orias & Caputi, 2013; Shu-Lan, 2001).

As many Marxist economists point out, while Shiva rails against the west, she ignores local power relationships that leave the vast numbers of Dalits, Adivasis and other minoritized groups with little power in a hierarchical society (Sur, 2018; Wallis, 2008). In most of India, women are deprived of primary rights to land and the technology that makes land productive. Shiva makes a claim that women are more likely to use natural resources for sustenance than for cash. However, new research with foraging communities and agricultural communities point to the fallacy of the assumption. Recent research also substantiates that woman can act in both negative and positive ways in preserving the environment (Caito, 2012).

In conclusion, the years after independence were marked by protests that reflected social inequities rooted in gender, caste, class, and traditional hierarchies. Activists were guided by their conviction that capital intensive growth was essentially unequal and did not lead to a sustainable nation. Much of the ecological resistance was over the government takeover of agricultural lands or commonly owned forests, to pave the way for large development projects such as dams or mines. For many of the people involved in the struggle, the conflicts were related to their material well-being and basic sustenance as opposed to larger ideas of preserving forests and rivers or cleaning up the air.

International Movement for Environmental Justice in Bhopal

One major exception to the rule was the people's protest movement against Dow Chemical in Bhopal. In 1984, on the night of the 2nd of December, a gas leak by a company owned by Union Carbide (now sold to Dow Chemical Inc.) led to the toxic exposure of over 500,000 people and with hundreds of thousands more having the potential to be injured. It was the largest industrial accident at that time in the world. The disaster brought new awareness of the dangers posed by unbridled development fueled by greed. The Bhopal disaster inspired one of the largest movements of justice that is still ongoing as of the writing of this paper (Sarangi, 2002; Zavetoski, 2009).

Women were again at the helm in terms of organizing for justice for the people affected by the tragedy. Rashida Bee and Champa Devi Shukla, two of the women whose family was affected by the gas leak led several decades long activism to force Union Carbide and later Dow Chemical to clean up the affected areas as well as to adequately compensate the families of victims of the negligence. They organized mostly lower class, lower caste, uneducated women into a powerful force that continually reminded the world of the grave injustice done to the community. Over the two and a half decades that they had been at the helm, the women resorted to continual hunger strikes and rallies both in India and in other places where Dow Chemical offices were located (Bisht 2018). As their protests moved to the countries of the Global North, it drew local workers and activists, many of whom were also survivors of poisonous chemicals let out by large agricultural chemical companies. For instance, in Midland Texas, 300 local residents signed on to the lawsuit against Dow for the contamination of their community by dioxin (Armiero & Sedrez, 2014). The two women, one a Muslim and the other a Hindu, received the Goldman Prize for Environmental Justice in 2004, 20 years after the accident.

The success of the Bhopal justice movement lay less in the theorizing of larger environmental issues than the immediate connection that the activists felt to the health of the soil and air in Bhopal as well as larger concerns regarding the welfare of the inhabitants, both present and the future. In her speech after receiving the Goldman prize, Rashida Bee pointed to how being a mother made her a powerful activist:

> *"We know that not just in Bhopal, but mothers everywhere in the world carry poisonous chemicals in their breasts. Bhopal is simply the most visible example of corporate crime against humanity…we are not flowers to be thrown at the altar of corporate profit, but we are the women of Bhopal, dancing flames committed to dispelling darkness."* (Bee, 2004)

In her words are echoes of the ecofeminism of Vandana Shiva and the socialist principles espoused by Megha Patkar. Throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s much of the

environmental activism of women was interwoven into a critique of capitalism and the inequities baked into Indian society. While for all these feminist activists, ecological concerns were important, it was couched within a larger critique of profit making under capitalism that looked at the earth as dead material that was to be exploited, just as it objectifies women. Several of these women had been active in the nascent labor movement in post-independence India and believed that the environmental question was inseparable from issues of caste, class, and gender equity.

Environmentalism in the Era of Neoliberalism

The 1990s were a time of rapid liberalization of the Indian economy. Economic growth took off at a dizzying speed. Along with this growth, came the inevitable destruction of local ecologies. Many of the trade barriers and investment restrictions that had been in place since independence were removed. This was not accompanied by regulatory mechanisms to ensure that appropriate environmental and labor practices were followed. The Indian government's choice of which industries to liberalize was based purely on economic considerations and environmental impacts were not considered as important (Badami, 2005). While there were environmental control agencies that have been in existence since the 1970s in India, they have little teeth in implementing anti-pollution measures. As a result, the 1990s saw a huge shift to highly polluting capital-intensive industries from less polluting ones prior to the liberalization (Gamper-Rabindran & Guha, 2004). Between 2008 and 2020, there were 318 million Indian women who have become internal climate migrants (Jain, 2021)

The calls for more regulations and studies on the environmental impacts of this massive growth was dismissed by successive governments as anti-development, and anti-nationalist (Badra, 2013; Kaur, 2021). In many cases, the environmental impact statements were written by developers themselves. The consequences for the most vulnerable communities that lay in the path of these projects was disastrous. Unlike during the years after independence, the Indian middle class and intelligentsia remained oblivious to the environmental injustices perpetrated in the name of development (Veron, 2006). While there were pockets of protests mostly organized by the communities most affected, they garnered little attention by the media which had by now become almost completely privatized or were merely the mouthpieces of one of the political parties. The capitalist class of the country, drunk with the possibility of India becoming a world industrial powerhouse, left no room for dissent. In fact, the biggest polluting industry representatives injected themselves into the government to prevent any meaningful legislation from being enforced (Pillai, 2019). As Ramachandra Guha laments:

> *"India today is an environmental basket-case; marked by polluted skies, dead rivers, falling water-tables, ever-increasing amounts of untreated wastes, disappearing forests. Meanwhile, tribal and peasant communities continue to be pushed off their lands through destructive and carelessly conceived projects."* *(Guha, 2013, pp. 2)*

Amidst this rather depressing survey of the environmental movement (or the lack of) in India, a new generation of women scientists committed to social justice have been spearheading the push to more government action. Sunita Narain is perhaps the most well-known among them. During her own growth as a researcher, she was convinced that to tackle the looming massive ecological problems in the country, local democracy was an indispensable tool. She reasoned that local communities knew better than large policy making bodies, where vital resources such as

water is garnered, how resources are used, and what are the constraints to developing natural resources in a sustainable way. She was instrumental through the research done by her institute, the *Center for Science and Environment*, in exposing the high levels of pesticides in soft drinks like Coke and Pepsi in India (The Economic Times, 2006).

In recent years she has called for a movement that she titles, *The Environmentalism of the Poor* as opposed to the prevailing *Environmentalism of the Rich* (Martinez-Alier, 2014). For her, a sustainable world cannot be achieved without empowering the most vulnerable communities and engaging in participatory democracy when thinking about resource allocation (Narain, 2013). Like Vandana Shiva, she leans on the long tradition of sustainable community development in India; she points to rain and other forms of resource harvesting, seed preservation, sustainable forest use, irrigation systems that are communally shared, as having a long history, before unbridled development became an unquestionable practice in modern India (Narain, 2008). Narain calls for a total restructuring of cities to allow for spatial and economic mobility. She rails against the model of development that emphasizes unsustainable growth while believing the ill-effects of runaway city growth can be cleaned up and rectified after (Kayastha, 2007).

Most recently, Narain has been taking up the challenge of formulating solutions to the global problem of climate change. The Indian women ecological leaders of an earlier generation were mainly focused on the sustainability of specific communities located in specific spaces. Narain represents a new group of leaders from the Global South that are pushing back against the new colonialism that are laying the solutions for climate change on the backs of the poorest countries in the world. She argues that countries of the Global North, especially the US, have contributed the most to global greenhouse gas emissions since the industrial age began (Narain, 2013). For instance, from the 1950 to 2o2o, the US has contributed more than 28% of the global emissions of CO^2. Therefore, the countries of the Global North have an environmental debt that they owe to the countries that they had colonized for over four centuries. Narain calls for that debt to be redeemed (Narain, Ghosh, Saxena, Parikh & Soni, 2015).

The history of the environment movement in India demonstrates that throughout its post-independence period women have played a significant role in pushing back against environmentally destructive policies and have carved new frameworks that have inspired ecological movements in other parts of the world. In recent years there has been a dramatic rise in transnational women's groups collaborating on the twin goals of environmental health with women's empowerment (Ignatow, 2007). The result has been a spectacular collaboration within and across the countries of the region to ensure women's voices are heard in environmental policy discussions. Many of these organizations have adopted a socialist feminist approach to viewing and addressing climate change and its accompanying negative impacts (Harcourt, 2013).

There has been a tectonic shift in the strength and assertiveness of the new feminist environmental movements in South Asia. Participants are increasingly from diverse backgrounds and represent diverse interests. The leaders of these movements are often digital natives and use the tools of technology to communicate their desires and goals to a wider audience with ease.

The Gaps in Current Environmentalism in India

Despite this new-found awareness among some in the environmental movement, there has really been no recent galvanizing of any community around an ecological issue that can be identified as a new framework to understand the post-industrial phase of environmentalism (Benabou 2021). India in the last two decades has faced a continuous onslaught of environmental disasters that should have provided the impetus to a cohesive national movement but, there is little

debate or discussion about frameworks to understand these events. Popular media portrays environmental disasters as incidental or because of corruption by whichever party oversaw the disaster. Over the last few years, the monsoons have gotten either irregular and/or intense, parts of the country are in a cycle of flood and drought, there is massive deforestation, and the cities routinely figure in the most polluted list in the world. And yet, there is little public discourse that connects class, gender, caste, and the Anthropocene (Benabou, 2021).

Guha (1997) has identified the environmentalism of the Indian middle class as disjointed and insufficient. It might help make a splash to save tigers or other endangered species of rare fauna and flora, but it does little to help the country in a sustainable direction. Much of the urban elite think of ecological issues as specific problems to be mitigated so that they can continue with their lives with minimal disruption (Narain, 2013). As has been pointed out by ecofeminist leaders of the past, unless questions of violence and inequities are addressed, India will continue to hurtle towards a terrifying future of dead land and water and unbreathable air that kills children way before their time (Maudsley, Mehra and Beazley, 2009).

In addition to the problems of an environmentalism that centers the concerns of those who are privileged in India, activists are today so busy countering the many assaults on their civil liberties that they have ceded the question of a healthy environment to the media where the problem is rarely understood as one of justice (Frazier, 2018). There are internal conflicts and ambiguities that have remained unresolved as the region faces an urgent climate crisis that demands immediate action. Some environmental groups, especially those whose membership is rooted in religious tradition or non-normative identities and sexualities often feel marginalized and unheard within the larger ecological movement (Alley, 2019). The more powerful or visible groups often are in cities and are composed of middle-class educated women, leaving out the voices of working class and rural women. While the impact of climate change and ecological destruction disproportionately is felt by working class women, their needs are not calculated in high level negotiations on sustainability (Karpouzoglou, Marshall & Mehta, 2018; Kotkin, 2020).

In addition, while women's groups are successful in turning out many women for specific marches and demonstrations, there is a lull in day-to-day action. When there are everyday actions included in the movement, they often consist of individually driven activities such as planting trees or an advertising push to encourage recycling rather than challenging the state to implement environmentally sustainable laws (Frazier, 2018). For any day to be successful, there is a need to incorporate short-term and long-term goals, specific strategies, and mass mobilization towards these goals. It involves sustained communication across differences – religion, class, region, and identities.

To that end, there have been transnational gatherings of women from the Global South including India before, during, and after the 26th gathering of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 26). While there was even a day devoted to analyzing the impact of climate change on women, women themselves have been underrepresented at the official negotiations of the participating governments (Shankar, 2021). In fact, the fossil fuel lobby was one of the largest delegate groups in COP 26, larger than any other country at the meeting; this does not bode well for climate action. There is an urgent need for a new ecofeminist, eco socialist movement that centers the voices of the poor, the marginalized and the frontline communities that are most vulnerable to climate change.

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