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**Interrogating Development in India Post-Globalization: Gender,
Environment, and the Politics of Sustainability
-by Aditi Verma**

The concept of "development" has often been a contested terrain, rooted in power dynamics, colonial histories, and the imposition of a singular, universal trajectory for progress. This trajectory, popularized in the mid-20th century, was not an organic response to the needs of the Global South but a continuation of colonial logic under new guises. Wolfgang Sachs notes, the idea of development has become a "ruin in the intellectual landscape," an artifact that reflects the failures of industrial civilization to address inequality, environmental degradation, and cultural erosion (Sachs, 1992). Development emerged in the postcolonial era as a geopolitical strategy to integrate newly independent nations into a global economic order that largely served the interests of the Global North. By labeling nations as deficient, the development project created a moral and economic imperative to intervene. It reconfigured colonial power into developmental hegemony, where nations were judged not by their autonomy but by their adherence to Western norms of progress.

The advent of globalization in the late 20th century marked a significant shift in the discourse on development. Neoliberal policies championed by institutions like the IMF and WTO prioritized market liberalization and privatization, often at the expense of social and ecological well-being. Critics like Ashish Kothari argue that this era represents "development without nation-states," where transnational corporations dictate the terms of progress (Aseem and Kothari, 2012). While proponents of globalization highlight its potential to integrate economies and lift millions of people out of poverty, critics point to its uneven impacts. For instance, while urban elites in the Global South may benefit from access to global markets, rural communities often face displacement and resource extraction. Vandana Shiva's idea of "monocultures of the mind" is particularly relevant here, as globalization erases diverse epistemologies and ways of living in favour of homogenized, market-driven models.

The shift toward globalization in the late 20th century marked a profound reconfiguration of the development paradigm. While earlier models relied heavily on state-led industrialization and

protectionist policies, globalization ushered in an era of neoliberalism characterized by market liberalization, deregulation, and privatization. This transition, often framed as the logical progression of development, intensified the integration of national economies into a global capitalist system. However, beneath the promises of economic efficiency and increased growth lay deeper crises—social, environmental, and cultural—that disproportionately impacted marginalized communities and ecosystems. Globalization's emphasis on economic growth at all costs has exacerbated the already extractive nature of development, leading to profound ecological degradation, and intensifying the systemic marginalization of women. The pursuit of infinite growth on a finite planet manifests as relentless resource extraction, deforestation, pollution, and biodiversity loss. Large-scale projects, such as dams and mining ventures, driven by global capital, have devastated ecosystems and displaced millions, leaving communities without access to land, water, or livelihoods. Shiva's critique underscores the ecological violence embedded within the development framework, revealing how globalization intensifies the commodification of nature, transforming it into a resource for economic exploitation.

The concept of vulnerability has gained prominence in environmental studies. Many seemingly "natural" disasters like earthquakes and floods are often exacerbated by specific social policies or processes. True disasters occur when a significant portion of the population is highly vulnerable. Frequently, the poor, racial and ethnic minorities, the less educated, and those with limited political power face greater risks from natural calamities. Similarly, these marginalized groups often bear a disproportionate burden of environmental degradation. Major instances of such differentiated sufferings come from colonial India. Ramachandra Guha's groundbreaking work, "The Unquiet Woods," stands as a seminal work in this field. With the commercialization of forests in the Himalayas, there was a significant shift in access to the means of production. The British administration disregarded communal rights, preferring to engage solely with individual farmers, thereby jeopardizing traditional rights such as grazing and fuel gathering. This led to widespread protests, including an arson attack targeting official buildings and the destruction of logging-marked forest blocks.

In the United States, growing awareness of disparities in resource access and escalating environmental degradation fueled the rise of the environmental justice movement in the 1980s. Activists advocated for environmental protection as an inherent human right, calling for

sustainable development and equitable access to available resources. Unlike the predominantly middle-class, male, and white composition of the mainstream environmental movement, participants in the environmental justice movement were largely low-income women and Black individuals. These principles of environmental justice resonated globally, evolving into a true international social movement. During the 1980s, the indigenous rights movement also gained momentum and secured a significant presence in international forums by the 1990s. Numerous movements across the globe have attempted to demonstrate 'resistance politics' in terms of environment like the Chipko movement in India, the Anti-Militarist movement in Europe and the United States, the movement against hazardous waste dump in the United States, and the Green Belt movement in Kenya.

Idea of Ecological Feminism

Ecofeminism emerged during the 1970s as a response to the Anthropocene crisis, joining the radical movements for justice in the United States. As communities globally mobilized against environmental degradation, ecofeminism provided a fresh perspective to examine exploitation. Influenced by the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 70s, feminists started to recognize the interconnections among war, corporatism, environmental harm, and gender-based oppression. The term "Ecofeminism" was coined by French author Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. It was further elaborated by Ynestra King around 1976 and gained momentum as a movement in 1980 when the first ecofeminist conference, titled "Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s," was organized in Amherst, Massachusetts, US (Spretnak 1990). According to Ynestra King, ecofeminism revolves around the interconnectedness and integration of theory and practice. It recognizes the environmental devastation caused by corporate and military forces, alongside the threats of nuclear warfare, as feminist issues. This perspective identifies a common thread of masculinist mentality that seeks to control not only the Earth and its beings but also women's bodies and sexuality, relying on various systems of dominance and state power to enforce its agenda. Women's protest against ecological degradation, nuclear threats, and advancements in biotechnology and reproductive technology have highlighted the links between patriarchal oppression and violence against women, marginalized non-Western, non-White communities, and the natural world. This realization underscores that women's liberation cannot be achieved in isolation from broader efforts to protect nature and life on Earth. Furthermore, Philosopher Karen

Warren emphasizes that ecofeminism incorporates diverse perspectives often excluded from dominant discourses, such as the voices of Chipko women, to develop a global understanding of how male domination drives the exploitation of both women and nature. An ecofeminist perspective is therefore characterized by its structural pluralism, inclusivity, and contextualism, emphasizing the importance of considering specific contexts in comprehending sexist and nature-exploitative practices.

Vandana Shiva stands as a prominent advocate for ecofeminism in India, critiquing the country's development model and its adverse environmental impacts. While her work aligns with radical ecofeminists, her broader critique places her within the socialist ecofeminist framework. Shiva criticizes modern science and technology as products of Western patriarchy and colonialism, perpetuating violence against both women and nature. She contrasts this with traditional Indian philosophy, which views nature as a living and creative process, embodying a feminine principle of activity and sanctity of life. Shiva highlights the marginalization and devaluation of women resulting from the exploitation of nature under the guise of development. However, she also emphasizes women's agency for change, citing examples like the Chipko movement in the Garhwal Himalayas, where women fought to protect forests. Shiva underscores the ecofeminist principles of connectedness and spirituality in opposition to capitalist patriarchal science, which she argues disconnects and dissects.

However, critiques of Shiva's arguments point out several limitations. Her analysis, centered on rural women in Northwest India, is sometimes over-generalized to all Third World women. Dietrich cautioned against neglecting caste factors, political options, and internal hierarchies within traditional communities (Dietrich, 1992). Shiva's essentialization of Third World women and Hindu-centric views are also challenged, particularly concerning their applicability to diverse minority communities. Moreover, Shiva's attribution of environmental degradation and women's subordination solely to colonial history and Western development models overlooks preexisting inequalities of caste, class, and power. Critics like Meera Nanda accuse her of neo-populism and oversimplification, arguing that she disregards the complexities of social constructs and local contexts. Shiva's advocacy for ecofeminist principles, such as women's special relationship with nature, faces scrutiny regarding property rights and land ownership. In patrilineal societies, women's access to land is mediated through male relatives, impacting their ability to engage in

conservation practices. Studies suggest that women's relation to the environment is not solely determined by sustenance needs but also influenced by cultural gender roles.

Overall, while Shiva's ecofeminist perspective sheds light on the interconnectedness of gender, environment, and development, it faces criticism for oversimplification, essentialization, and overlooking complex social dynamics. Balancing the advocacy for women's agency with a nuanced understanding of cultural, economic, and political contexts remains crucial in advancing ecofeminist discourse in India.

When considering the merits and drawbacks of ecofeminism, one could look at Bina Agarwal's "*feminist environmentalism*" perspective. This viewpoint is grounded in tangible realities and perceives the relationship between women and nature as shaped by the gender and class (or caste/race) dynamics of production, reproduction, and distribution. As highlighted by Bina Agarwal (1992), women's interaction with the environment varies socially and historically. Particularly in impoverished rural households, women serve as both sufferers of environmental degradation and active participants in movements aimed at preserving and revitalizing the environment. They engage with the environment in multifaceted ways, sometimes contributing positively and other times negatively. Therefore, uncritically assuming a natural link between women and nature and presuming that women, being most severely impacted by environmental decline, inherently possess pro-conservation attitudes, is deemed unacceptable.

Krishna (2009) emphasizes that adopting a gender perspective in environmental issues goes beyond merely considering the viewpoint of women. Using the Bankura project as an example, she suggests that if women gain greater control over the means of production, including their own labor, they would be better equipped to navigate the changes brought about by India's new economic policies. Krishna argues that women's involvement in environmental movements and initiatives will contribute to their empowerment.

Therefore, it becomes imperative to reinterpret the voices of women within environmental movements in developing nations against large-scale multi-purpose projects backed by global economic institutions and multinational corporations.

Narmada Bachao Andolan

In the 1980s, a significant environmental battle that cast doubts on the promises of rapid economic development and its aftermath was the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Struggle). Following India's independence from British rule, successive Congress governments prioritized large-scale industrial projects to address India's underdevelopment. These initiatives aimed to provide ample electricity to fuel the growth necessary to sustain the population. The approach adopted was technocratic, with minimal consultation of local communities before undertaking massive projects such as mining, hydroelectric power generation, or nuclear plant construction. The government's policy openly stated that communities would need to make sacrifices for national progress (Gadgil & Guha, 1993).

The Narmada River, which spans several states, became a target for a series of dam projects. Despite some consultations, the Indian government proceeded to construct several dams of varying heights along the river's course. However, government reports warned of significant negative environmental impacts resulting from the dams and river diversions. The environmental impact assessment indicated disastrous consequences for local communities along the river's path. Medha Patkar, then a faculty member at a prestigious Mumbai university, became aware of the issue and began organizing local communities to resist the dam projects, calling for further review and consultation (Dwivedi, 1997)

Patkar and fellow organizers traced the funding for the dam projects and discovered that much of it had been approved by the World Bank without a thorough ecological assessment. Although the Narmada Bachao Andolan did not present itself as an environmental movement, it was guided by critics questioning the imposition of development projects without community input. Taking inspiration from Gandhi's nonviolent freedom struggles, the movement mobilized local communities along the Narmada to assert their rights to their lands through civil disobedience. Despite being displaced by government projects and facing flooding of arable lands, people remained in the rising waters until forcibly removed. This struggle for inclusive democracy gained attention from environmental activists and writers like Arundhati Roy, who highlighted how large dams hinder inclusive growth. From a gendered perspective, building the dam not only

worsens the situation for women in tribal communities but also undermines their cultural traditions. They struggle to find their place in India's evolving development landscape and often face exploitation and increased poverty as a result. Additionally, the dam's construction leads to environmental damage and displacement, disrupting the connection between women and the river and forests, which provide essential resources for households, given their burden to fetch their livelihoods.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Patkar and others worked on various environmental justice issues under the National Alliance of People's Movements. Recognizing that ecological distress was a unifying issue, the organization aimed to collectively address unequal development that primarily benefited the rich. While the Narmada Bachao Andolan had only partial success in halting the damming of the Narmada, it established a model for grassroots mobilization and drew international attention to the adverse impacts of development projects ignoring local communities, especially women. The withdrawal of the World Bank from the project following the launch of the struggle subjected the organization to increased scrutiny regarding its international aid policies.

Organization in response to the Bhopal Gas Tragedy

In 1984, a gas leak from a company formerly owned by Union Carbide (now part of Dow Chemical Inc.) toxically exposed over 500,000 individuals to methyl isocyanate, a lethal gas, with hundreds of thousands more believed to have been affected. This incident marked the largest industrial disaster at that time, highlighting how post-globalization, developing nations have become fertile grounds for exploitative practices under the guise of economic development. UCC's negligence was evident in its decision to keep operating standards significantly lower than UCC facilities in the United States, wherein developing nations like India become "sacrifice zones" for corporate profit. The U.S. government's complicity in shielding UCC and Dow Chemical from accountability, including blocking extraditions and lawsuits, underscores the unequal power dynamics inherent in globalization. The disaster disproportionately affected impoverished, predominantly Muslim, and lower-caste communities living in informal settlements near the factory. These communities lacked access to adequate healthcare, legal recourse, and compensation, compounding their suffering. Many affected families suffered intergenerational harm, including congenital disabilities and chronic illnesses, due to continued exposure to toxins.

The Bhopal tragedy underscores how urban planning and industrial policies prioritize corporate interests over the well-being of vulnerable populations.

The Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1984 was not only a catastrophic industrial disaster but also a landmark moment for grassroots environmental and social activism in India. Among the most remarkable aspects of this struggle has been the active role played by women survivors, who transcended barriers of class, religion, and caste to become the backbone of long-term resistance and advocacy efforts. Rashida Bee and Champa Devi Shukla, whose families were impacted by the gas leak, spearheaded decades-long activism to compel Union Carbide and later Dow Chemical to clean up the affected areas and fairly compensate the victims' families for their losses due to negligence. They mobilized primarily lower-class, lower-caste, and uneducated women into a potent force that continually raised awareness about the grave injustices suffered by the community. Over the course of their leadership, spanning two and a half decades, the women staged persistent hunger strikes and rallies in India and at Dow Chemical offices worldwide. The movement mobilized women into the *Bhopal Gas Peedit Udyog Sangathan* and later the *Chingari Trust*, focusing on survivors' rights, medical care, and compensation. These organizations not only provided a collective voice for marginalized women but also worked to expose the systemic inequalities that exacerbated the tragedy's impacts. Their protests resonated with workers and activists in the Global North, many of whom were also victims of harmful chemicals released by large agricultural companies. For instance, in Midland, Texas, in the 2000s, around 300 local residents joined a lawsuit against Dow for contaminating the Tittabawassee River floodplain with dioxin, where soil contamination reached levels significantly above acceptable thresholds for residential areas causing health risks and devaluation of their properties.

Throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, much of women's environmental activism intertwined with critiques of capitalism and the inherent inequalities in Indian society. While ecological concerns were paramount for these feminist activists, they were part of a broader critique of profit-driven capitalism that viewed the earth as a resource to exploit, akin to the objectification of women. Many of these women had been involved in the emerging labor movement in post-independence India and believed that environmental issues were inseparable from questions of caste, class, and gender equality.

Conclusion

As women in Bhopal, and Gujarat revolted against these internationally-funded exploitative projects, they did transcend their traditional roles as household caretakers, creating a public identity previously inaccessible to them. They achieved this transformation by using their bodies in novel ways: as activists, demonstrators, embodying a collective physical strength greater than the individual. Instead of confining themselves to domestic spaces, they took to the streets, parks, and captured headlines. They infiltrated domains previously closed to them, assuming roles as organizers, collaborators, and spokespersons. By utilizing the female body as a tool for protest, they expanded its societal functions and harnessed it for their own purposes.

Although these movements continue to mobilize marginalized women, voicing their concerns bringing them to the public discourse, but their academic interpretations and formal theorisations of these movements, continue to fall into the essentialist and homogenizing idea of motherhood, reproduction and nurturing reinforcing the idea of women biologically being close to nature by prominent and privileged ecofeminism theorists. This calls for a rewriting of women's movement not as the result of women's similarity and essential closeness to nature, but rather an energetic process that grew first from the social expectations of motherhood and developed into a challenge to their social limitations.

The portrayal of women within the above-mentioned models also presents inherent problems. Across various analyses, women are often depicted as passive recipients of either the benefits or burdens of development. In the integration model, women are sidelined from meaningful participation in economic modernization; instead, they are seen as mere beneficiaries of technological progress. The marginalization model portrays women as helpless victims of global capital, while the exploitation model, grounded in economic determinism, assigns them no more agency than the integration model's technological determinism does. Even the socialist feminist model tends to view women through a lens of 'dual systems' determinism, emphasizing their roles as products of multiple constraints shaping their reproductive and productive functions. None of these models adequately recognize women as autonomous agents directing their own destinies,

actively engaged in subsistence, innovative responses to transitional challenges, or strategic resistance against imperialist impositions.

The issues of environment and ecology entered the mainstream discourse post the emerging waves of globalization in third world countries in the 1950s. It highlighted the unequal consumption rates of natural resources between developed and Third World nations, emphasizing global political and economic concerns. As previously mentioned, there have been numerous battles waged regarding the modernization of agriculture, the unchecked exploitation of natural resources, opposition to large-scale, multi-purpose dams and river valley projects, as well as efforts against air and water pollution. The protests against environmental destruction and the struggles for survival illustrate the intricate intersection of caste, class, and gender issues within these movements. It is predominantly the poor, lower-class, and lower-caste individuals, particularly peasant and tribal women, who bear the brunt of environmental devastation and are therefore the most engaged in protests. Consequently, women cannot be viewed as a homogeneous group, whether within a nation or globally, as ecofeminists often suggest.

The notion that women inherently possess a special relationship with nature, as argued by a lot of ecofeminists theorists, is contradicted by examination of various protest sites and movements. Women's interactions with nature and their responses to environmental degradation must be understood within the context of gender, caste, class, and race-based divisions of labor, property, and power. Women are both victims of environmental degradation and active participants in efforts to regenerate and protect the environment. The adverse effects of these processes on class and gender are evident in the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems and livelihood strategies that rural, impoverished women rely on.

These movements and the literature of gender, environment and their intrinsic linkage to capitalist patriarchy challenge the dominant development paradigm and its reliance on short-term solutions to development issues. They emphasize the interconnectedness of class, caste, and gender dynamics within development processes. Arguably, the women's movement should prioritize environmental issues that directly impact the survival strategies of a significant portion of women across different caste, class, and racial backgrounds. Overall, there is a pressing need for

comprehensive change concerning development, redistribution of resources, and institutional structures. Environmental and gender concerns must be addressed in tandem, and the emerging social movements in India addressing the rampant liberalization and globalization of the economy, appear to offer a promising prospect for initiating such transformative change.

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