



IJMRRS

**International Journal for Multidisciplinary
Research, Review and Studies**

ISSN: 3049-124X (Online)

Volume 1 - Issue 3

2024

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ABSTRACT

Feminism in India is usually dominated by urban, upper or middle-class voices and considers them as the basis of it in India. This quotient overlooks the impact of grassroots-level feminist movements or movements in general even if they were not explicitly framed as Feminist. The impact of these movements on feminism and how they embody true women's empowerment has been overlooked.

Many movements have been a part of Indian society since 1947 bringing change at a national level to bringing change at grassroots level. Movements fostering ecological or legislative changes have also led to the rise of grassroots feminist consciousness in India as women have been a vital part of these movements, at the forefront and the ones who have initiated them. Movements such as the Anti Arrack of Telangana and Chipko movement of Uttarakhand aren't explicitly feminist movements but they represent the mobilisation of women to fight for tangible issues and gave them a political voice, a voice which wasn't provided to them earlier. This movement represents how women go on and challenge established authorities and structures to attain necessities. They represent the power of women when mobilised can make a far-reaching impact and aren't just a subject to the private domain. This article focuses on **how grassroots movements impact feminist consciousness in India.**

KEYWORDS

1. Women's Liberation Movement (India)
2. Grassroots Feminism
3. Ecofeminism
4. Chipko Movement
5. Gaura Devi
6. Environmental Justice

Chipko: From nature to empowerment

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Introduction and Background

The women's liberation movement in India is a diverse multidimensional movement that focuses on not only gender equality but also the fulfilment of socioeconomic resources. Starting in the pre-independence era when women became a big part of the Indian independence movement as they took part in various revolutionary activities. Women came outside and joined Gandhi's salt march to showcase resistance against the British austere tax system on basic commodities. One notable involvement of women was in the Swadeshi movement, they showcased the spinning of khadi and boycotted any foreign goods to show resistance against the British. This movement gave a platform for housewives or women from conservative families to enter the Indian national movement. Women were prominent in producing literature and articles voicing their opinions against the tyrannical British regime. Women's liberation movement or the development of feminism in India had a similar trajectory as Western feminism. The Indian feminist movement also declined after the fulfilment of some demands. The '60s and the '70s saw the rise of radical movements in India which included the rise of eco-activism, student protest, worker agitation etc. For this article

let's focus on women. Indian feminism has usually been analysed from an urban perspective with the involvement of upper or middle-class women being at the forefront of this movement. The primary goal of these women groups in urban areas was to generate awareness about women's oppression among the whole society and just women themselves to increase their area of impact. Their main question is how to organise themselves to generate an impact. 2 sections which were prominent right at the beginning were the socialist feminists and the ones part of the revolutionary mass movement. The former was seen as a forum to mitigate socialist feminist theory and the latter believes in spontaneous development which will be catalysed and multiplied by a wave of feminism. Most groups had a fairly loose structure and often named themselves the Bombay group or the Delhi group. They started demonstrations and public protests against issues of death due to dowry.

Grassroot Level Movements

Now even if we are charitable to the fact that these urban upper or middle-class women's movements did cater to women at the local level these movements still did not incorporate them as a major stakeholder. What are the major events that involved these women as major stakeholders in the Indian feminist movement and diversified its goal? Grassroots-level movements play a major role in highlighting women's leadership and empowerment even if not explicitly. These grassroots-level movements are a community-led effort led majorly by people from marginalised sections of society focusing on local issues such as deforestation. These movements became an entry point for women's activism to enter the mainstream and influence feminist consciousness.

Rural women in the late 20th century were subjected to the private domain and were considered the nurturers of the house. They were largely confined to the traditional roles set by the patriarchal standards of the society such as taking care of the children or elders, cleaning the house etc. They didn't have much voice and weren't a subject of consideration or take counsel for decision making. Women had a prominent role in agriculture as they made the majority of the population work in agriculture in rural areas. Men used to go to big cities to find jobs there whereas women had a duty to take care of the land but they had no land ownership rights. Domestic violence was also on the increase without any exit for women as they did not have any escape due to a lack of educational and financial backing.

Mainstream Indian feminism, particularly in its early phases, was largely shaped by urban, upper-caste, English-educated women. While it addressed important legal and social reforms—such as women’s rights in marriage, property, and employment—it often remained disconnected from the everyday struggles of rural, lower-caste, and tribal women. This created a representational gap, where the voices and issues of marginalized women were underrepresented or invisibilized in dominant feminist discourse.

Forests, liquor shops, water, and land became the new grounds for feminist consciousness—far removed from courtroom battles and legislative advocacy. Grassroots movements like Chipko emerged from the lived experiences of women on the margins. These were not organized under the banner of feminism, yet they organically challenged patriarchal power structures, asserted women’s collective agency, and redefined what political participation could look like. A movement in the Garhwal region of Uttar Pradesh against private contractors who visited Mandal forest for trees felling to create space for construction. These trees were placed systematically and influenced the ecological balance of the village greatly. By nature, a movement of eco-activism impacted female consciousness at a greater level. Women were at the forefront of this movement as they initiated the idea of hugging the trees to stop the contractors from cutting them. This showcases an example of female-led movements and extends the role of females from the nurturers to the protectors of nature and their habitat.

Chipko Movement

Grassroots spaces offered alternative feminist imaginaries—ones rooted in local cultures, oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and everyday resistance. They exposed the limitations of “one-size-fits-all” feminism and expanded the scope of feminist thought by anchoring it in context-specific struggles. These movements demonstrated that feminism is not always declared—it is often embodied through action.

In *Seeing Like a Feminist*, Nivedita Menon argues that feminism is not a fixed ideology or a set of demands — it’s a way of seeing, challenging, and shifting power and Chipko is a great proof for this argument. The Chipko movement is considered as an ecological movement concerned with the preservation of forests and maintaining the ecological balance as well as people standing up to protect the resources that provide them livelihood. The Himalayan people have a close bond with nature; this movement is proof of that bond. This movement is also evidence of how some major forest policies of India have caused hazards to the

ecological balance and uprooted the indigenous people who depend on these forests. Since there is a certain type of development of industry and technology along with mercantilism capitalism in India, the chipko proponents argue that in this process there is alienation of forest dwellers from the forest and also disappearance of their economy and destruction of the ecosystem in long as well as short term. And while traditional preservers of forest are given away there is no replanting of forest after the felling is done. The Chipko movement is an interesting case study to study women's development. The Chipko movement is certainly not a women empowerment movement nor does it propagate any change in social structure. The observers of the movement have stated that women of the Garhwal region have been so backwards that it is surprising to observe the extent of their awareness about the region. Women were the sole in charge of cultivation and the ones most prominent in agriculture. Thus they understood the very inert problem of agriculture and were able to realise the implications of the felling of trees by the commercial. The felling of trees increased the amount of flooding and landslides in the mountain area, the women were able to comprehend the link between their victimisation and the barring of mountain slopes for commercial interest.

Women saw the reason behind their problems and the need for sheer survival made them support the cause and connect to it deeply. The events at Reni were something to be noticed. The forest department announced an auction for almost 2500 trees in Reni Forest overlooking the Alaknanda River. On March 15, 1974, Cp Bhatt reminded villagers of the 1970 flood and warned them of more landslides and floods and he suggested hugging the trees as a tactic. The women got this message very clearly and they were led by Gaura Devi. They met with abuse but didn't budge from the trees. This was a situation which forced women to take action immediately with firmness and underlying courage. Gaura Devi challenged the men to shoot, then only fell the trees and went on comparing the trees to their mother's home. This forced them to retreat. By this showcase of strength, the Uttar Pradesh government set up a committee to investigate the matter and ended up with the withdrawal of the lumber company. The committee after 2 years decided that no trees should be cut in that particular region and put a ban on felling of trees under 450 square km miles of reni for 10 years.

Chipkoo set a wave of new ideas, one of which is vital to mention; women have always been considered by the dominant section of society as the ones who need protection and at their best in the domestic domain and not usually for the public domain especially in rural areas as

they have always been considered as the weaker and the less intelligent sex. They have always been considered as someone in the background. Women might have been the centre somewhere but they have never been the central which means that women's contributions were often treated as supplementary rather than central to historical narratives. This depicts how women haven't been the main characters of any historical event but have only been a part of it.

The Chipko movement set another trajectory. It showcased women as the protectors, it acted as an idea that presented a very alien idea to society which wasn't alien in existence but alien in realisation, women of rural areas were militant when it came to issues concerning their families rather than issues concerning them or their work. This has highlighted them as a protector as well as the nurturers of their families and their livelihoods. Vandana Shiva In *Staying Alive* discusses how women's traditional roles make them first responders to ecological crises, and therefore natural leaders in environmental movements. She argues that chipko have had gendered consequences grounded in women's subsistence roles, ecological knowledge, and community-based survival strategies. It has represented women as political actors rather than passive nurturers.

Effects

The chipko movement, even though concentrated in one area, motivated women of neighbouring areas to raise their concerns and protect themselves from exploitation. This event blazed a trail for environment conservation by women in Gopeshwar in 1975 in Bhynder Valley in Jan 1978 then at Parsari in Aug 1979 then at Dongri Plain in Feb 1980. This led to a realisation about how sensitive women are for environmental issues and leaders like CP Batt started to address themselves to women and women were also asked to attend meetings, someplace they were never expected or motivated to take part in. This spread of motivation for women tells us how rural, contemporary movements like Chipko set a path for women to enter the domain of the public and the domain of discussion. Feminists later realised how women getting involved in the general movement later went on to voice their issues and the exploitation they faced as women which further led to the discussion of ideas of women's equality. Women's resistance led feminists to securitize the distant and immediate past, to look at the roles played by women in the general movement for social transformation and to reclaim some of the movements that predate contemporary feminism.

Theoretical Engagement

Contemporary feminists in India draw deeply into the histories of these grassroots-level movements to reclaim indigenous, intersectional, and community-rooted legacies of resistance. Feminist scholars and collectives today emphasize that Gaura Devi's leadership in Chipko represents environmental and feminist leadership, especially in academic syllabi and activist documentation. Today's feminist spaces emphasize the importance of lived, material struggles — a tradition rooted in the practical concerns of rural women. There is a growing eco-feminist movement in India today, particularly around climate justice, that takes inspiration from Chipko's fusion of environmental and feminist values. Women-led protests against mining in Odisha and forest rights movements in Chhattisgarh often refer back to Chipko in slogans, visual imagery, and organizing methods.

Alternate Examples

Apart from Chipko, several other grassroots feminist movements in India have significantly shaped feminist consciousness. The Anti-Arrack Movement in Andhra Pradesh during the 1990s saw rural women mobilize and fight against the widespread sale and consumption of arrack (local liquor), which had led to increased domestic violence and economic hardship for individuals and leaves major footprints on their families. This movement powerfully demonstrated how women's everyday struggles could translate into collective political action. Similarly, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), founded by Ela Bhatt in 1972, empowered poor, self-employed women through labor rights and financial independence. The Shahada Movement in Maharashtra, led by Adivasi women in the 1970s, protested sexual violence and bonded labor, asserting and reinforcing rights over their bodies and labor. In Uttar Pradesh, the Gulabi Gang, founded by Sampat Pal, organized rural women to resist domestic abuse, dowry violence, and caste-based oppression. The Narmada Bachao Andolan, while primarily known as an anti-dam environmental struggle, also provided a space for displaced tribal women to assert agency and leadership. Though not always framed as feminist in theory, these movements have deeply expanded the scope of Indian feminism by anchoring it in the lived realities of marginalized women.

Conclusion

The evolution of feminism can't be contained to urban upper class movements while their contribution in social, legal and legislative aspects can't be undermined. Thus it's important to be radical and understand feminism consciousness from the grassroots. These grassroots

level movements can't be labelled as feminist but have changed the notions of women's political participation and agency . These movements emerged from the lived realities of survival, displacement, and domestic oppression — transforming those experiences into collective resistance , resistance for protecting one's livelihood .as we have observed how chipko or other such grassroot level movements , simply started with mobilisation of women for issues affecting their livelihood lead to a much bigger realisation of women's position in society and the power they hold and their potential . Such movements showcased them as the fierce protectors that they are . Women who were alien from the idea of empowerment themselves ; these grassroot level movements provided them a platform to comprehend this and then act upon it .

Today's feminist movement draws motivation and continues the legacies of these sidelined and forgotten movements. By reclaiming the legacies of Gaura Devi, the Arrack protestors of Andhra Pradesh, SEWA's labor activists, and countless unnamed rural women leaders, contemporary feminism is expanding its vision — one that includes resistance rooted in soil, survival, and social transformation. These movements prove that feminism in India is not only about courtroom victories or academic theorizing — it is also about hugging trees, refusing liquor, demanding wages, and reclaiming dignity. Grassroot level movements have redefined women's position and feminist consciousness in India . They acted as a stepping stop and harbinger of empowerment in Indian society .

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