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Indian Intersectional Ecofeminism and Sustainability: A Study on *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior and Jharkhand's Save the Forest Movement*

Jyothi Justin¹ and Nirmala Menon²

Abstract

Ecofeminism in India, if approached and analysed non-intersectionally, will negate the struggles of the indigenous ecofeminists and their encounters. Therefore, it is important to look deeply into the indigenous ecofeminist initiatives in the country, especially by the Dalit and the Adivasi women. The paper attempts to engage with intersectional ecofeminism in India by focusing on the textual and the pragmatic aspects of the movement through specific case studies. “Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior” and “Save the Forest the Movement” in Jharkhand are closely read and analysed to understand the similarities and differences in the relationship between tribal women and their environment. This paper, therefore, tries to see the impact of ecofeminist activities of Adivasi or tribal women on battling environmental crisis and the reception of the same in policy making for sustainable development. The main aim of the paper is to understand the effect of intersectional ecofeminism in India on sustainable development. The paper also acknowledges the criticisms against intersectional ecofeminism and highlights the presence of alternate movements. This analysis further leads to the proposal of intersectional ecofeminism as a suitable model for sustainability in future.

Keywords: *Intersectional Ecofeminism; Ecofeminism; Intersectionality; Postcolonialism; Sustainable Development*

Introduction

We are either going to have a future where women lead the way to make peace with the Earth or we are not going to have a human future at all.

Vandana Shiva

Vandana Shiva, a prominent ecofeminist from India sheds light on the importance of ecofeminism and its role in sustaining human race on Earth as women are associated with nature from time unknown. The gendered terms like “Mother Earth” or “Mother Nature” used to explain nature, and the animalized language used to describe women (Das, 2021) are evidence of the same. Ecofeminism is a powerful activist and academic movement that links gender rights (feminism) with environmental conservation. Mary Mellor (1997) defines ecofeminism as “a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation

¹Jyothi Justin, Doctoral Candidate, Digital Humanities and Publishing Studies Research Group, HSS, IIT Indore, India.

Email: jyothijhr@gmail.com

²Nirmala Menon, Publishing Studies Research Group, HSS, IIT Indore, India. Email: nmenon@iiti.ac.in



of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women". Ecofeminism thus also critiques the different relations drawn between nature and the "feminine". It emerged as part of the second wave of ecocriticism, along with ecological justice, which marked a shift from romanticising nature to paying attention to the destruction that the urbane and modern humans were inflicting upon the environment. In its earlier stages, ecofeminism focused on deconstructing the notion that women were associated with the environment because of the former's "nurturer" and "care-giver" stereotypes. Further, the ecofeminists endeavoured in establishing the similarities between women and nature based on their marginalisation and the ways in which the two were controlled, appropriated, and exploited by men (or the patriarchal society at large). Such an approach was ground-breaking at the time for the initiation of an atypical discourse around the relation between women and nature as opposed to the notion of purity, vulnerability, fertility etc., which were deemed to be their similarities by different religions and cultures. However, as with every theory, ecofeminism also underwent several changes to become more inclusive in its approach.

Françoise d'Eaubonne (2020) defines ecofeminism as "relating the oppression and domination of all marginalized groups to the oppression and domination of nature". The author argues that "oppression, domination, exploitation, and colonization from the Western patriarchal society has directly caused irreversible environmental damage". Karen Warren (2000), foregrounds the importance of ecofeminism when she says, "women suffer higher risks of environmental degradation than men". This definition of ecofeminism reveals "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1989) as an inherent part of the theory as female relationship with nature varies according to their degree of dependence. Yet during the initial stages of the movement, ecofeminism was seen as a "Western" concept based on its origins as it failed to consider the manifold experiences of women based on their socio-political and cultural identities (A. E. Kings, 2017). The focus on gender and nature by the western feminists lead to homogenisation and the creation of a monolithic category "women" (Talpade, 2007), thereby ignoring the diverse experiences and relations that women shared with nature based on their race, caste, class, religion, culture etc. This criticism on homogenisation (the non-male population as a homogenous whole) first observed in the feminist movements of the West later lead to the concept of intersectionality.

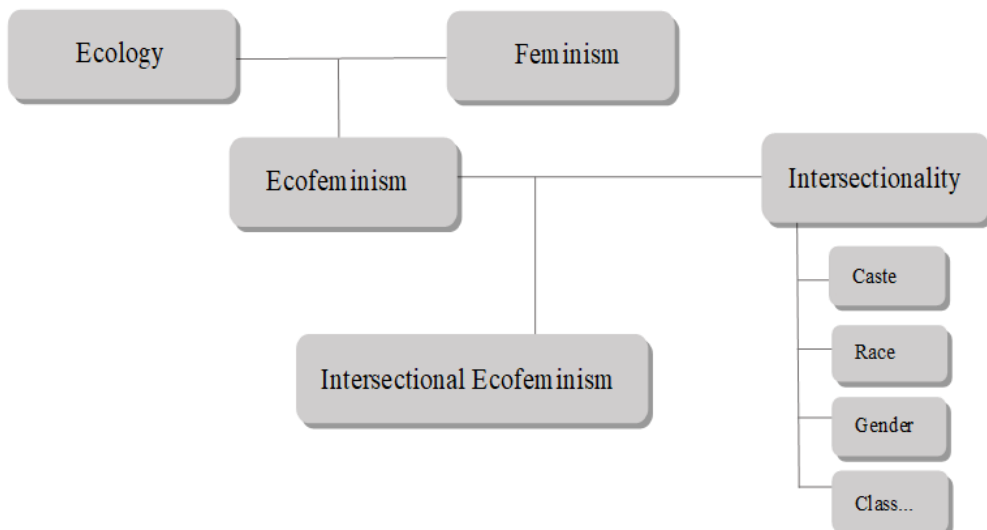
"The concept of 'intersectionality' refers to the interactivity of social identity structures such as race, class, and gender in fostering life experiences, especially experiences of privilege and oppression" (Gopaldas, 2013). This thought was also reflected in ecological movements and gave rise to new movements like intersectional ecofeminism and intersectional environmentalism. Hence, the focus shifted from gender to overlapping themes of identity that determine one's extended marginalisation in society, relation with and access to environment and natural resources. Intersectional Ecofeminism therefore became an inclusive movement by shedding its tendency to homogenise the category "women" and by acknowledging the diverse relation between women and environment i.e., in short ecofeminism embraced the intersectionality theory. In India intersectional ecofeminism should focus on the caste hierarchy operational in the society which coupled together with gender, determines women's experience with nature. Since analysing the vast number of intersectional factors that operate in India will be difficult and beyond the scope, in this paper we look at the tribal intersectional ecofeminist initiatives by analysing the text *Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior* (2018) and Jharkhand's *Save the Forest Movement*, to understand and suggests ways to incorporate the same in policy making for sustainable development.



Intersectional Ecofeminism

Intersectional ecofeminism recognises and foregrounds the marginalisation of both nature and women with an emphasis on the discrimination and exploitations they encounter based on “the effects of sexism, class, homophobia, caste systems, and racism on women and their relationship with the environment” (A. E. Kings, 2017). For instance, ecofeminist intersectionality focusses on the non-homogeneous marginalisation of women and the relations between women and environment, when it highlights the different experiences shared by a Dalit or an Adivasi woman and an urban upper class/caste woman with her natural environment. Therefore, incorporation of intersectionality into ecofeminism leads to the inclusion of women from various backgrounds in environmental policy making which will further lead to both non-discriminatory practices and sustainable development. This further gives visibility to the traditional environmental protection and conservatory practices within the indigenous knowledge systems primarily of the rural and indigenous women, which should also be considered during the process of policymaking.

Figure 1. showing the theoretical components of Intersectional Ecofeminism



Intersectional Ecofeminism in India

In India, the concept of ecofeminism and intersectionality are important as gender identity is inextricably intertwined with caste and class. Therefore, Indian Intersectional Ecofeminism primarily looks at the caste and class-based experiences of women and its effect on their relationship with environment. Though there are also other categories in operation, in this paper we focus on the caste-based experiences especially that of the Adivasi women. The discourses on ecofeminism in India have always revolved around prominent activists like Vandana Shiva, who is synonymous with the term ‘Indian ecofeminism’ (A. E. Kings, 2017), Medha Patkar, Sugathakumari, Nandini Sahu, Arundhati Roy etc, who are engaged in furthering the movement. Though their works are important, the rural women in India have also steered the movement without being aware of the movement per se. Yet they remain

'invisible environmentalists' (Gadgil & Guha, 2008), unidentified and unappreciated by the mainstream media and scholarly communities for their efforts. From the Chipko movement to the recent movement in Madhya Pradesh where Dalit women dug a well to combat water crisis (Vashistha, 2018), rural women have always played a central role in protecting the environment.

Ecofeminism has a long history in "Indian environmentalism" (Kumar & Mishra 2022). In fact, one of the initial movements in the history of ecofeminism took place in April 1973 in the village of Mandal in Uttar Pradesh with "The Chipko Movement" or "The Chipko Andolan". This movement garnered attention across the world as it was a non-violent conservation movement that involved groups of women hugging ("Chipko" means "to hug") the trees to prevent their large-scale felling by government facilitated contractors. The Chipko mode of protest was later picked up by the other parts of the country and all over the world. The Chipko Andolan (1973) in the Tehri-Garhwal Himalaya, the Jungle Bachao Andolan (1982) in Bihar and Jharkhand, the Appiko Chaluvali (1983) in the Western Ghats of Karnataka, the 'tree-hugging' protests in Switzerland, Japan, Malaysia, The Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand are some of the examples. Though the movement of the 1970s was led by the environmental activist Sunder Lal Bahuguna, the history behind the movement indicates the link between feminism, intersectionality, and ecological justice.

The real roots of Chipko movement dates to 1730, September 11 (now declared National Forest Martyrs Day by Department of Environment and Forests), when the Bishnoi community lead by Amrita Devi Bishnoi, refused to let the king's men (Rajputs) cut trees for the construction of Palace, by hugging them resulting in her decapitation and the killings of 300 people. This incident forced the Maharaja of Jodhpur to pass a decree, forbidding the felling of trees in the area. The Government of India now awards the "Amrita Devi Bishnoi Smrithi Paryavaran Award" for environment conservationists to commemorate the first indigenous ecofeminist of India. In the present scenario, the Chipko movement is often read in the context of the Gandhian principle of non-violence across the world. But what is often missing in the critical readings is the fact that the movement was a struggle against caste, power, and gender discrimination as well. The Bishnoi's are a lower caste in Hinduism who believed in environmental conservation and so a woman from the community endured double marginalisation – based on caste and gender. The Bishnoi women defied the caste and gender norms of their times by refusing to surrender their rights to ecological resources before the upper caste Rajput soldiers which was a major reason for their mass murder. The women's defiance was connected to ecological conservation and to their realisation that the marginalisation of nature is directly proportional to their marginalisation (denial of access to forest resources meant increased poverty and physical labour). Thus, the first ecofeminist movement in India that led to a change in sustainable policymaking had its roots on the intersectional identity of the women involved.

Despite the intersectional history of ecofeminism in India, the recent discussions around the movement focus mainly on the works of prominent activists of the sub-continent. Vandana Shiva is the most visible and celebrated ecofeminist currently. She is critical of the role of patriarchy and capitalism in the marginalisation of women and nature (Shiva, 1988). Though her works are of significance, she homogenises the experiences of the third world women (like the initial Western ecofeminists) and adheres to essentialist principles (A. E. Kings, 2017). She fails to address the issues of caste/tribal/ethnic identity that increases the marginalisation



of women by restricting their access to environmental resources (Shiva, 1988). Gabriele Dietrich (1992) observes that Shiva ignores the caste hierarchies and their interconnections with patriarchy that operate in traditional tribal and peasant communities by essentialising the female relationship with nature. Dietrich wonders what the “feminine principle” would imply for Dalits, tribals, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and other minority communities, indirectly indicating the need for intersectional ecofeminist approach in India. Shiva has also been criticised for shifting the blame of gender inequality and environmental crisis to the colonial impact on India by Bina Agarwal (1992). This is because Shiva fails to acknowledge the presence of the hierarchical caste system prevalent in the pre-colonial India that was (and still is) marginalising both women and nature.

The rural and the indigenous women, on the other hand, have always been involved in environmental conservation practices despite the constant negligence their works face from media, academia, and the public. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge what they have been doing even without the aid of a theory or a movement. The intention here is not to divide the movement as urban and rural ecofeminism in India but to acknowledge the fact that the social marginalisation that the latter experience lead to different experiences. The case that intersectional ecofeminist approach in India make is to look at the role of caste, class, sexuality, culture etc., while examining the relationship between women and their immediate environment. However as addressing all intersectional categories is beyond the scope of this paper, we are looking at the intersectional ecofeminist principals of tribal women through two case studies as mentioned previously. Also, we believe even the “smallest” act that come from the marginalised women are to be amplified and appreciated through an inclusive approach, given the greater risk that they are undertaking for a sustainable future.

Dalit Ecofeminism and Adivasi Ecofeminism

Dalit Ecofeminism and Adivasi Ecofeminism are at the forefront of intersectional ecofeminism in India where the marginalised indigenous women helm the movement to reclaim their right on environmental resources. (Here we do not address Dalit and Adivasi as a homogenous group as we acknowledge the socio-political and cultural differences in the marginalisation that they face). However, “the current ecofeminist scholarship in India has not, so far at least, fully explored the relationship between Dalits and environmentalism” (A. E. Kings, 2017). Dr B. R. Ambedkar (1992) for instance proposed the concept of ‘inclusive environmentalism’ since he believed deprivation of forest resources to the native people ‘was caused by colonial forest policies on one level and the attitude of upper caste Hindus on another’ (Kumar & Mishra 2022). Intersectional Ecofeminism in this context recognises colonial, casteist and patriarchal discriminations inherent in the distribution and consumption of natural resources. However, Dalit Environmentalism is often overlooked in the mainstream environmental discourses. For instance, Ambedkar’s notions of equitable access to environmental resources are often ignored in mainstream discourses on ecological conservation. Jyotirao Phule is another important Dalit environmentalist and theorist “who valued the importance of nature and ecology” (Kumar & Mishra 2022).

Dalit environmentalism aspires to foreground the “Dalit’s ecological crisis of access to and prohibition from various natural resources” (Kumar & Mishra 2022) and to promote indigenous ways of conserving nature. Dalit ecofeminism, as part of its intersectional nature, focuses mainly on the daily resistance of Dalit women and Dalit land against patriarchal and

upper caste exploitation. Dalit narratives, especially autobiographies, play a significant role in Dalit intersectional ecofeminism in India by focusing on the relation shared between the Dalit women and their environment, the restrictions they face in accessing environmental resources like water bodies, grazing and cultivation lands as well as to cultural institutions like religious sites, schools, and colleges. Baby Kamble, Daya Pawar, Urmila Pawar and Bama are some of the prominent Dalit writers who writes on ecofeminist themes. Their narratives attempt to dismantle the notion of “eco-casteism” which is “an ecological determinant of caste, (that) provides a rationalization and justification of caste system through nature” (Sharma, 2018). Through subtle and implicit themes, motifs and symbols, Dalit women writers express their discern over casteist double marginalisation of women and their environment.

Dalit ecofeminist standpoint is also explicitly upheld by prominent theoreticians and activists. Chayyar Datar’s (Dalit) ecofeminism advocates “(i) Equitable distribution of water, not on the basis of size of landownership but on the size of the family. This would empower even the landless families in asserting their right to water. (ii) Women exerting right over the permanent assets developed in the vicinity of the villages under EGS. And (iii) acknowledgment of the right of the village over the wasteland surrounding it” (Gavaskar, 1995). Despite the absence of Dalit ecofeminism in mainstream discourses, the same also gets neglected by the prominent Dalit theoreticians. For instance, Datar (1999) is critical of Rege (1998), a prominent Dalit feminist, for ignoring ecofeminism, let alone Dalit ecofeminism in her critical engagements on Dalit feminism. Though critical of Rege, Datar sees intersectionality as an inherent part of ecofeminism and does not mention the term intersectionality: “Ecofeminists focus on caste- and gender-based oppression of Dalit women, particularly the women who are losing their livelihoods in the rural areas because of displacement and environmental destruction. They are also questioning the unjust distribution of natural resources, which is one of main causes for mismanagement of natural resources”.

Rev. Dr. George Matthew Nalunnakkal (2003) believes that the Adivasi movement in Kerala heralded by C. K. Janu have the potential to create an alternative to ecofeminism which he calls ‘organic womanism’. The Adivasi protest lead by Janu against the State Government occupied the Muthanga forests of the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in North Kerala against the breach of the agreement to provide five acres of land to each Adivasi family in return for the land taken for the Sanctuary. However, police evicted the Adivasis from the land resulting in the killing of an Adivasi leader and a policeman and injuring hundreds of Adivasis on August 16, 2003 (Rev., 2003). “The Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha” (AGMS), the Grand Assembly of the Adivasis, was formed because the protest resisted the combined efforts of the State and the land mafia under the leadership of an Adivasi woman, a significant political and cultural juncture in the history of intersectional ecofeminism in India. This is one of the many examples of Adivasi ecofeminist movements in the country.

Importance of Intersectionality in Indian Ecofeminism

“Ecofeminist intersectionality recognizes that women are likely to be amongst those most affected by environmental degradation, with those at the margins of society often experiencing these effects earliest and to the harshest degree” (A. E. Kings, 2017). Therefore, ecofeminists activities in the sub-continent are mostly organised and led by women who belong to the marginalised and agrarian classes as they are the direct victims of environmental degradation. Ecofeminism in the country emerged at the grassroots. Yet intersectionality is



ignored both in the environmental and feminist theoretical and public discussions in the country as stated in the previous sections. The environmental discourse of policy making revolves around men and feminist discourses around civil and political rights. This leads to the double marginalisation of indigenous, lower caste and rural women of agrarian classes, who are the ones leading the movement. The problem of exclusion of women from the decision-making process is visible in the National Environmental Policy (2006) that provided guidelines over issues of pollution, forest conservation, industrialization etc. It stressed the role of human participation from a patriarchal perspective failing to signify the participation of women and marginalised sections within communities who had limited access to resources and were therefore restricted in their ability to help in environment conservation. Similarly, the Indian implementation of the international Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation program (Ghosh, 2021) which aimed at reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, also excluded the indigenous women from the program.

The studies conducted on the relation between women and environment also assert the fact that the greater the dependence on nature, the greater is the tendency for women to preserve the same. For instance, Bosold (2012) highlights how women are essential stakeholders in the conservation of mangroves and proposes understanding the socio-cultural power dynamics and relations as the key to creating effective conservation strategies. Acknowledging the greater interaction between the native women and the mangroves help in the effective protection of these important ecological treasures according to Bosold (2012). Similarly, Agarwal (2009) establishes using data she collected from parts of Nepal and India on women's participation in executive bodies of forest preservation, the greater their participation in forest management and decision-making processes, the better is the forest conservation. It is important to note that it is the native rural women who participated in the process here.

Thus, intersectional ecofeminism has always shifted the focus to grass roots political and socio-cultural movements motivated by pressing pragmatic concerns ranging from issues of women and environmental health to science, development and technology, the treatment of animals, and peace, antinuclear, antimilitarist activism. Intersectional ecofeminist perspectives on environment are thus to be seen as an attempt to take seriously grassroots activism and political concerns by developing analyses of domination that explain, clarify, and guide the praxis.

Analysis of Intersectional Ecofeminism in India - A Study on Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior and Jharkhand's Save the Forest Movement

Mayilamma: The Life of a Tribal Eco-Warrior (2018), a translated autobiographical account of the tribal resistance led by Mayilamma, an Adivasi uneducated woman from the Eravala tribe of Plachimada, is an important direct textual example for intersectional ecofeminism in India. On 22nd April 2002, Adivasi's of Plachimada, a relatively dry village on the Tamil Nadu-Kerala border, peacefully protested for two years against the Coca Cola Company that extracted 1.5-2 million litres of water per day, thereby destroying the quality of water in the village wells of Vijayanagar colony and rendered the soil infertile (Madhavan, A., & Narayana, S., 2021). Mayilamma hailed as an "eco-social warrior" (Madhavan, A., & Narayana, S., 2021) represents the unrecognised intersectional ecofeminists of the country who silently wage war against the capitalistic and patriarchal society attempting to conquer their land and dignity. While the women protested encroachment and exploitation of their personal space (home), the

movement revived a long-standing history of tribal resistance against denial of their basic human rights and eco-activism from a feminist perspective.

The work is an example for “life-narrative as environmental justice” (Jinu, R., & Scaria, D. M., 2019) as it is a powerful testimony on the ability of “grassroots environmental acitivisms” (Varma, S. R., & Rangarajan, S., 2018) led by Adivasi women to expose the ill effects of globalisation and consumption. It is intimate evidence of the hazards of over-exploiting nature and a reminder that nature cannot provide and restore indefinitely. Women are mostly responsible for providing drinking water in Adivasi households; therefore, water scarcity will directly adversely impact the daily lives of the Adivasi women as they will be forced to walk long distances to fetch water (Warren, 2000). Thus, the exploitation of nature directly affects women whose lives are closely knit with their environment. This in turn forced the Adivasi women to protest undue usage of natural resources as well as to develop tools and techniques for sustainable utilisation of such resources. Therefore, the text needs to be read in the context of both the Adivasi and gender identity of Mayilamma, the protagonist of the work along with her relationship with the environment. Besides the protest, the narrative also focuses on the everyday experiences of tribal inhabitants through several ritualistic songs and lullabies with nature imageries which reveal their relationship with their immediate environment.

The subtitle of the text “tribal eco-warrior” indicates that the resistance led by Mayilamma was a result of multiple levels of oppression which were interconnected. Initially the pollution of drinking water in Vijayanagar colony cause severe diseases among the children of the local Anganwadi, which was the prime reason for the organised protest. Apart from this external oppression, Mayilamma and her allies had to face backlash and criticisms from within her community, especially from the men, who were influenced by the job offers given by the Coca Cola company. This was also because, “the effects of consuming contaminated water from the Coca Cola plant are seen more on the women and children, since the menfolk work outside the colony” (Madhavan, A., & Narayana, S., 2021). The tribal women who took part in the protest had to navigate through their daily chores as well thereby fulfilling their nurturer status before protesting a multinational corporate giant (Pariyadath, 2018). She was also morally attacked by the company and her villagers for her widow status to stop her from protesting. Mayilamma’s intersectional identity consequently comprised of her caste (tribal), gender (woman) and her socio-cultural position (widow) which constituted to her double and triple marginalisation which forced her to become an activist. The different dimensions of her identity are also evident throughout the narrative when she effortlessly interweaves both her personal life as a tribal widow and her role as an eco-activist into the narrative.

The text foregrounds the intersectional identity of Mayilamma and her allies throughout the narrative and attempts to portray her as an “indigenous, exotic, rebel tribeswoman” (Kuriakose, 2022) to the Global North. Madhavan, A., & Narayana, S., (2021), establishes that the feminine space or the concept of home for tribal women expand beyond the four walls of their physical house to include the forest in which they survive. This contrasts with an urban elitist woman whose daily sustenance as a nurturer is not dependent on her environment. Thus, the tribal Adivasi women are more prone to protect their environment and to devise sustainable methods for conserving the forests upon which her survival depends. The resistance was not only focused on water pollution but also deforestation, loss of species and habitats, endangerment of indigenous knowledge systems etc. “The activism spearheaded by Mayilamma culminated in the Kerala Home Department registering a



criminal case against Coca Cola for exploitation and pollution of Ground water in Plachimada in 2016” (Pariyadath, 2018) thereby leading to both eco-social justice and the sustainable use of the forest resources. The autobiography that follows the pattern of oral narratives therefore serve as a prototype of intersectional ecofeminism at the local level which when read at the global level, will highlight sustainability as an important outcome of the same.

Jharkhand’s “Save the Forest Movement” (Jharkhand Jangal Bachao Andolan, JJBA) by Suryamani Bhagat, founder of the Torang tribal rights and cultural centre is another noteworthy intersectional ecofeminist initiative in India (Singh, 2022). Bhagat together with fifteen other Adivasi women resisted the attempts by state-appointed forest officials to replace the existing flora with commercially viable timber that affected the biodiversity and the consumption habits of the Adivasis of the land. Suryamani belonging to the Oraon tribal community, was driven out of her ancestral land as a child, which further encouraged her to fight for the land rights of her tribal community. She is a “grassroots activist and educator at the helm of forest conservation movements” (Sengupta, 2022) who is involved in educating the tribal community, especially the women about their basic human rights. Her identity as a tribal woman prompted her to take up the cause of the land from which her community was constantly alienated. As part of JJBA, she was able to bring about a change (2006) in legislation of the *Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act* where the tribal people were given access to non-timber products and to legally own their land (Sengupta, 2022).

The gender identity of the rural protestors worked in favour of them during the resistance according to Bhagat who reiterates, “if I were a man, I would have been arrested and thrown in jail by now, because we women stand together, police are reluctant to act like that” (Perera, 2014). The women demanded that if arrested, then their children and livestock who depended on them for their survival should also be arrested. This indicates the “nurturer role” that the indigenous women play in their everyday life which gets disrupted if their natural environment is tampered with. The incident is also an example that foregrounds sustainable development as an inherent part of intersectional ecofeminism as any disturbance to sustainability will directly affect the daily life of a tribal woman.

Both the instances selected for this study resists exploitation of indigenous women and their environment as well as offer solutions to major discriminatory patriarchal and capitalistic practises using ecofeminist initiatives in India. Though Mayilamma’s struggle continues even after her demise, she was able to take legal action against the capitalistic giant who attempted to appropriate her land whilst resisting the patriarchal oppression from within her community. The Jharkhand incident on the other hand, shows how gender and indigenous identity could be used to initiate legislature changes that protect tribal people and their land. The analysis and interpretations of the selected case studies show that local instances and personal intersectional ecofeminist narratives are powerful political tools that have global impact in developing a sustainable model.

Intersectional Ecofeminism Leads to Sustainability

The above selected textual and pragmatic examples highlight the importance of intersectionality in ecofeminism from the Indian context based on the unequal access to environmental resources and the capability of intersectional ecofeminism to establish a sustainable future. This section will try to address the question: Does merging ecology, feminism and intersectionality have a real impact on environmental sustainability?

Ecofeminism is of prime importance in the contemporary society as it exposes the marginalisation that women and environment face in a society that is both patriarchal and capitalistic. Ecofeminism therefore promotes a more empathetic and reciprocating relationship with the environment and rejects the capitalist exploitation of natural resources. Also, regarding the utilisation of natural resources women are more directly involved. The UN report, *Gender and Post-Conflict Governance: Understanding the Challenges* (2015) suggests that women are more likely than men to use natural resources to increase overall family welfare and improve family food consumption thereby making them efficient at managing and utilizing limited natural resources. Thus, ideally, they should play a pivotal role in the formation and execution of environmental policies (especially in areas and factors directly affecting them) and doing so will lead to a sustainable utilisation of natural resources. But they are rarely given this opportunity.

Even at the national and international levels, women lead environmental movements – Greta Thunberg, Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, Sugathakumari etc., to name a few. Women's involvement in such movements are also the result of the understanding that gender equality cannot be achieved without equal rights to environmental resources. The Table 1 below illustrate the status of women across the world on gender-energy-poverty linkage. The table reveals how gender (resulting in low literacy rate, income, poverty etc) and unequal access to energy or natural resources (and land ownership) are deeply interconnected. The questions like access to resources, role of women in decision and policy making in environmental issues are hence quintessentially linked to feminism and gender equality.

Table 1. “Status of women across the world”.

Women represent up to	70% of the rural poor
Women Earn	10% of world's income
Women Own	1% of world's property
Women account for	2/3rds of total no. of illiterate people

Note: Reprinted from *The gender-energy-poverty linkage*, World Bank, 2005. Copyright 2005 by the World Bank.

It is important to take into consideration the notion of intersectionality, along with the above questions, as the lives of the rural, lower caste and the indigenous women of the developing countries are often much more directly connected with the environment. Any crisis in natural resources will directly affect their mundane life. For instance, scarcity of water leads to rural women including small girls to walk long distances to fetch water. Thus, the extent of marginalisation is directly proportional to the dependency on natural resources or in other words social and ecological justice are deeply interrelated. Therefore, women, especially rural women, would be more enthusiastic about policies that promote sustainable utilisation of natural resources than men.

The Women's Earth and Climate Action Network details the “heavier burden” on the marginalised women communities and nature “because of the historic and continuing impacts of colonialism, racism, and inequality” and argues for the inclusion of women in environmental policy making processes (*Why Women?*, 2018). Correspondingly, intersectional ecofeminism also argues for reconceptualising and restructuring of the contemporary patriarchal values that created gender binaries and hierarchical social organisations, to bring about a harmony between humans and nature. Ecofeminists highlight the fact that any policy or action for ecological conservation sans women participation would be incomplete and might even lead to further subjugation of both the women and the environment. Hence,



intersectional ecofeminism is relevant in the present failed system both developed and controlled by patriarchy and capitalism. *Why Women?* (2018) based on the conclusions drawn from different studies, also includes suggestions on how and why women should participate in mechanisms to coping with climate change. Some suggestions include engaging local women and girls who are usually responsible for collecting water for their households “at all levels of decision-making and implementation” of effective sustainable water resource management as they possess knowledge about local water systems; involving women in disaster planning and response to utilise their skillsets in “effective community rescue, support, rebuilding and conflict management”; including the “Traditional Ecological Knowledge” of Indigenous women who “are at the forefront of local and global efforts to protect and defend the territories of immense socio-ecological diversity”, in policy-making process to facilitate “healing and maintenance of the Earth’s climate and cycles” (*Why Women?*, 2018). The above-mentioned points also highlight the need to make allowance for the intersectional identity of women while attempting to include them in the process of mitigation and adaptation. Such intersectional ecofeminist practices both empower the indigenous women and pave the way for promoting sustainable indigenous practices in ecological conservation.

Critique of Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism has been criticised for supporting ethnocentric, essentialist and classist take on the relation between women and environment (Jackson 1993, p398) i.e., the popular comparison drawn between the two based on their caring and nurturing characteristics. As mentioned earlier, the exclusion of the ‘other’ women and the sole focus on western women is also subjected to criticism. Such drawbacks have led to the creation of parallel or alternate movements such as intersectional environmentalism, feminist environmentalism, organic womanism etc. However, such alternate movements stressed the importance of an intersectional approach towards environment and feminism thereby suggesting intersectional ecofeminism as the solution to the criticism against ecofeminism. For instance, Rev. Dr. George Matthew Nalunnakkal proposes an alternate version of ecofeminism which he calls ‘organic womanism’ that emphasises the parallels between Dalit female body and Dalit land based on the double marginalisation that both encounter at the hands of the casteist patriarchy in India. “The adjective ‘organic’ is engaged here to highlight the natural relationship that Dalit and tribal women have with nature, which women of middle class and other sections of society do not possess at the same level and intensity” (Rev., 2003). Organic womanism is concerned with the rape of Dalit and tribal women and “the rape of the land of Dalits and Adivasis” (Rev., 2003). In contrast to ecofeminism the focus here shifts from nature or ecology to specifically Dalit female body and land. Alternate movements to ecofeminism focus on specificities by abandoning the vagueness of generalising the marginalisation of women and nature.

Feminist environmentalism (Aggarwal, 1992) on the other hand reiterates that the greater concern for natural resources by women stems from their caste and class positions rather than their biological connection. New branches of philosophy, such as theological ecofeminism and eco-womanism also expanded the reach of ecofeminism. Some of them also began to incorporate postcolonial, decolonial and queer theories into ecofeminism but not all were welcomed positively. To reflect intersectionality, alternate names were suggested to the movement – “feminist, ecological citizenship” and “new ecofeminism” etc., but the same

were rejected as the “move to rename the discipline (is) completely unnecessary” rather the movement should be seen as ever evolving and as a “theory in-progress” (A. E. Kings, 2017). It is important to note that the criticisms against ecofeminism were mostly based on the absence of intersectionality which would further lead to sustainability as discussed in the previous section. Further the criticism against intersectional ecofeminism itself focuses on the limitless intersections of caste, class, race, gender, space etc that are to be addressed. “The broadness of intersectional approaches can be overwhelming; some feminists have expressed concern over the seemingly endless list of intersections to which we must address if one is to use intersectionality ‘correctly.’ . . . It is nevertheless necessary to point out that a critique of intersectionality, based upon either a desire for universality or fatigue with the broadness of categories to be considered, is likely to be derived from a position of privilege” (A. E. Kings, 2017).

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh (2017) looks at the implications in considering religion as a solution for climate change, as religion can initiate a collective change in the present scenario. Ecofeminism on the contrary believe that women hold the key to the environment crisis. Merging intersectionality to the theory shifts the focus to the participation of rural, native, and indigenous women in the process along with understanding the ‘differences’ in the relation between women and their environment. This results in granting them equal access to resources, equal role in the environmental decision and policy-making processes. The work done by the intersectional ecofeminists in the country (even without knowing the theoretical framework within which they work) is relevant and should be appreciated more by directing the attention of public, organisations, industries, media, and technology towards them. The eco-friendly methodologies, tools and techniques followed by indigenous women in preserving their immediate environment could be used as models for sustainable development in the country. Intersectional ecofeminism therefore proves to be important in India through its intersection of both the theory and practice.

This paper expounds intersectional ecofeminism, especially Adivasi and Dalit intersectional ecofeminism, at multiple levels by foregrounding the textual and pragmatic applications of intersectional ecofeminism in India and how it leads to sustainability. Given the long history of intersectional ecofeminism in India, it is high time that the activities, tools, and techniques of the rural and indigenous ecofeminists, the examples of which were discussed in this paper, gets amplified. The first ecofeminist movement in India, the Chipko movement, that led to a change in policymaking for sustainable development was a result of intersectional ecofeminism. The ventures analysed in this study also reveal the sustainability of indigenous tools and techniques that would further lead to a better future. The analysis of Mayilamma’s autobiography and *Save the Forest Movement* also offer a few creative solutions as part of intersectional ecofeminist discourse. The necessity to modify the legislature to ensure tribal land ownership and to educate the tribals especially tribal women about their rights; to make women the custodians of natural resources as they are more capable in both the sustainable distribution and utilization of the same and the facilitation of the translation of more tribal ecofeminist narratives to ensure the visibility of intersectional ecofeminist initiatives in India are some of them.



Adivasi ecofeminism is mainly focused on this paper as caste is an important intersectional factor in India that determines the relation shared between women and their environment. This intersectional factor is visible not only in the narratives by Adivasi women writers but also in their daily activities as they are forced to devise eco-friendly techniques to navigate through their lives. The textual and pragmatic venture highlighted and analysed in the paper bring the attention of the scholarly community to the otherwise ignored events. Through discussing the importance of intersectionality in Indian ecofeminism along with its criticism, the paper also sheds light on the core outcome of intersectional ecofeminism i.e., sustainability. Both ecofeminism and intersectionality are evolving theories or theories in-progress with the potential to accommodate more diverse concepts – their combination therefore will lead the researchers to questions that were earlier ignored or unexplored especially in the global South.

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Note: The table and examples are taken as it is from different papers in the current literature.