




UNDERSTANDING FEMINIST ENVIRONMENTALISM: A STUDY IN THE NAYAGARH DISTRICTS OF ODISHA

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Feminist environmentalism acknowledges that gender roles and relations are intimately connected to environmental issues. It argues that women, often marginalized in society, possess unique knowledge and experiences that are essential for sustainable environmental management. This research article explores the intricate relationship between feminist perspectives and environmentalism in the context of the Nayagarh districts of Odisha, India. The study investigates the unique challenges and opportunities faced by women in rural Nayagarh in their pursuit of sustainable environmental practices. Through a combination of qualitative interviews, field observations, and secondary data analysis, we shed light on the multifaceted ways in which women's agency contributes to both environmental conservation and gender equity in the region. The findings highlight the importance of recognizing women's roles and perspectives in environmental initiatives especially in forest conservation and suggest policy implications for fostering sustainable development that is inclusive and equitable.

Keywords: *Feminist, Environmentalism, Forest Conservation, Sustainable Development.*



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1. INTRODUCTION

Environmentalism has gained considerable attention globally due to growing concerns about climate change, biodiversity loss, and unsustainable resource consumption. Concurrently, feminist perspectives have significantly influenced various aspects of social, economic, and political discourse. The "feminist environmental" approach is grounded in material reality and considers the interaction between women and nature as organized by the organization of production, reproduction, and distribution by gender and class (caste/race) (Bina Agarwal, 1992). It

illustrates that women's relationships with the environment vary socially and historically. Women, particularly in impoverished rural homes, are both victims of environmental deterioration and active participants in environmental conservation and regeneration initiatives. Feminist environmentalism represents a critical perspective within the broader environmental movement that recognizes the intrinsic connections between gender equality and environmental sustainability. It emphasizes the material aspect of gender-environment relationship. Interest in particular resource and ecological process

are shaped by the role and responsibilities that men and women are engaged in daily-basis. Men and women have diverse wants and interests due to gendered division of labor, which causes various material-based interests in certain resources and ecological processes. Feminist environmentalism recognizes that gender roles and relationships are inextricably linked to environmental challenges. It argues that women, often marginalized in society, possess unique knowledge and experiences that are essential for sustainable environmental management. This perspective emphasizes the need of gender-sensitive policies and the participation of women in natural resource management decision-making processes.

Women are always in the frontline in forest conservation and resource management as these are imbibed in their daily livelihood practices based upon traditional and cultural values. Both men and women have a stake in forest management but the nature of the stake is not the same. The nature and extent of dependency on forest is much more among women. There is strong link between women community and forest. Women have deep knowledge about forest like types of grass, process of extraction from the ecosystem etc. Indigenous women community contributes to the global goal on ecosystem protection, sustainable economic development, food security, climate change adaptation and mitigation through their interest and preference in forest conservation. The indigenous women are actually connected to the forest through their food safety nets, livelihood security and their cultural identity in a sustainable manner. Though both men and women community are engaged in forest governance through institutional mechanism due to constitutional mandates like reservation policy but opinion of women on forest governance were not taken by majority in male dominated societies. Role of Women in decision making process is very low. Also, cases of double disparity exist even women do participate in the decision-making process in case of outsider or having no knowledge on forest governance. Most of the time, it has been seen that men relatives always play vital role in decision making process as an alternative of women participants. Though there is legal and constitutional recognition for women empowerment but the issue of social acceptance still exists in form of casteism & patriarchy. Central laws and state laws are there in regards to forest governance like Indian Forest Act,1972, Wild Life Protection Act, 1972, Forest Conservation Act,1980 but for the first time the rights of forest dweller on forest were recognized by the Protection of Forest Rights Act passed in 2006. Forest Dweller Community are now engaged in forest conservation through the process of democratic decentralization. However, women who

constitute more than 50 % of world population were excluded from the process of decision making in forest and land management. The present study tries to understand the gender inclusiveness policy in community forest management in Odisha.

The relationship between Women and Forest are symbiotic in nature. Women rely on the forest for a living and to support their families. Food and forest supplies are essential to the food production system, which is the principal work of women. As a result, Forest adds to women's social identity, economic freedom, and chances for progress. At the same time, women's reliance on the forest implies that they have extensive knowledge of the forest ecology and the necessary skills to maintain and preserve the forest. Nonetheless, despite their close link with the forest, women are barred from participating in forest conservation and governance owing to gender disparities. It has been observed that most of the time women became hesitant to take the lead compelled by the existing socio-economic, political and cultural norms and remain excluded from leadership and decision-making roles. Women are involved in initiating forest management plans despite their other domestic responsibilities. Studies has shown that women's role in community forest governance improves conservation and regeneration (Agarwal, 2009). Hence the present studies tries to find out the role of women community in forest conservation and what are the challenges in front of gender equity approach in forest conservation in Odisha. This study aims to bridge these two fields by examining the intersection of feminist principles and environmentalism in the context of the Nayagarh districts in Odisha, India. Nayagarh, a predominantly rural region in Odisha, is known for its rich biodiversity and agricultural practices. However, it faces environmental challenges such as deforestation, soil erosion, and water scarcity. This study seeks to understand how women in Nayagarh engage with environmental issues and whether feminist perspectives shape their approaches towards sustainable environmental practices.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

James .et al (1998) have pointed out the necessity of incorporating gender into conservation and how women might be actively engaged in conservation process. Women engage with their surroundings differently than males. They have extensive knowledge of forest resources and are more reliant on them than males. However, current societal and cultural conventions influence and limit how women may participate in conservation and natural resource management. Gender inequality affects everyone, but it is especially harmful to women and girls. Several studies have demonstrated that including

women in natural resource management and conservation activities results in better outcomes. They found that conservation and natural resource management organizations must address women's inclusion.

Agarwal B. (2009) has analysed the gender composition of local forest management group in India and Nepal and how it affects forest conservation outcomes. She has pointed out that due to gender division of labour difference in forest conservation approach has been seen among men and women. Women's dependency on forest is everyday based and more than men which is occasional. So, women are much more adversely affected when forest and natural resources are decline, degrade or disappear. Women have deep knowledge about forest ecosystem based on their gender role activities. There is gender difference in preference in resource management. In her study she has found that groups with a high proportion of women in the principal decision-making body show significantly greater improvements in forest condition in both regions.

Mago P. & Gunwal(2019) has highlighted the environment protection movement in India and environmental activists in India to emphasize the relevance of women's voices and perspectives in the sustainable development of the environment. They came to the conclusion that women actively participate in environmental conservation more than males because women are more immediately touched and influenced by nature. Women may preserve energy resources significantly more efficiently than males with sufficient environmental education and understanding.

Gabriel A. et al. (2020) has conducted a comparative examination of two indigenous communities in the Philippines' Nueva Ecija to explore the role of indigenous women in forest conservation and how the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, and traditional knowledge affects forest conservation. They discovered that gender-restrictive indigenous cultures cause more environmental deterioration. The engagement of indigenous women in forest conservation exemplifies the gender-based space and independence offered by society. The key problems that the indigenous women population has in forest conservation are insufficient access to resources, education, and sources of income. They argue there is a relationship between women and nature, which reflects the various degrees of women's subjugation under patriarchy and levels of women's engagement in forest conservation.

Nichols J et al. (2021) has conducted their study in rural Costa Rica and found that many factors like the personal experiences of the women often affect the types of conservation activities in which they choose to participate and more involvement in

conservation activities has eventually resulted in a leadership role. Strategies used by NGOs have motivated the women to become the leader in conservation activities.

Ghosh (2021) has explored the traditional practices of a small group of rural women in Ranpur block of Nayagarh district of Odisha celebrating SialiUchsav, a festival of forest protection and regeneration. They held the celebration to protect Siali (*Bauhinia Vahlia*), a sort of creeper that grows around Sal trees inside the forest, and planted conserved Siali seeds, on which their life is based. They celebrate the event during SnanPurnima (the bathing ritual of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra) because the monsoon rain showers aid to grow seeds planted by the community in the forest. The ladies chose to protect and rejuvenate the forest through the SialiUtsav celebration by planting additional Siali seeds because they rely on Siali leaves for both family consumption and selling. They have traditional seed preservation procedures. In the months of March and April, the ladies gather the seeds. They gather Siali seeds that have fallen to the ground and collected fruits. The seeds are then kept in an organic mixture of manure, cow dung, cow urine, ant-hill soil, and ash. The ladies work in groups to knead a combination of all of these materials into little balls, then place the seeds inside and sun-dry it. Sun-dried seed balls are made 15 days before the celebration. This procedure aids in the germination of the seeds and the proper development of the creeper.

Nitnaware (2021) has explored the tradition of 'Thenga Pali' among tribal women of Odisha's Nayagarh districts in order to voluntarily protect the forest and its resources. 'Thenga' signifies sticks, while 'Pali' means 'turn'. It is a tradition through which people of the Kodarapalli tribal hamlet help to conserve their communal forest. The women's community has been conducting forest patrols for at least five decades. The ladies guard the forest against smugglers, timber thieves, and others who steal natural resources without license. In comparison to males, women truly comprehend the worth of resources and their values. Mismanagement existed previously when Men were in charge of the forest. They have a liberal stance against smugglers. As a result, the women assumed responsibility for forest conservation. 500 acres of forest area under their protection have been revitalized as a result of their conservation initiatives.

3. OBJECTIVES

This research article seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To investigate the roles and experiences of women in environmental conservation efforts in the Nayagarh districts of Odisha.

- To analyze the intersectionality of gender, class, and caste in shaping women's access to and participation in environmental decision-making.
- To explore how a feminist perspective can inform more inclusive and sustainable environmental policies and practices.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to gather data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with women in Nayagarh to understand their perspectives on environmental issues, their roles in environmental conservation, and their experiences in the community. Field observations was conducted in the Nayagarh districts to observe and document various environmental practices and activities, paying particular attention to the involvement of women and secondary data analysis method like existing literature, government reports, and documents related to environmental initiatives in Nayagarh were analyzed to provide context and supplementary information.

4.4. Data Collection:

Respondent	Age	Occupation	Environmental Opinion on Environmental Issues	Environmental Engagement	Insights on Environmental Issues
1	32	Teacher	Concerned and supportive	Active participant	Experienced in water conservation
2	45	Farmer	Highly concerned, advocate	Limited involvement	Knowledgeable about soil erosion
3	28	NGO Worker	Passionate about conservation	Leadership in NGO	Expert in local flora and fauna
4	37	Scientist	Expert, research-driven	Researcher, educator	Specializes in biodiversity
5	50	Homemaker	Concerned and supportive	Minimal involvement	Familiar with waste management
6	40	Student	Developing interest, eager to learn	Learning through classes	Awareness about climate change
7	55	Activist	Advocacy and grassroots engagement	Leading community group	Focus on deforestation
8	29	Teacher	Supportive, interested in education	Awareness campaigns	Awareness about pollution issues
9	42	Farmer	Concerned and supportive	Limited involvement	Familiar with sustainable farming
10	33	Journalist	Advocacy and reporting	Reporting on eco-issues	Awareness of local wildlife
11	31	NGO Worker	Passionate about conservation	Active in local projects	Expert in wetland ecosystems

4.1. Population:

The population of interest for this study is women living in the Nayagarh Districts of Odisha who are involved in environmental conservation efforts or have perspectives on environmental issues.

4.2. Sample:

The sample for this study was selected through purposive sampling, with a focus on identifying and recruiting women who are actively engaged in environmental conservation activities or who have valuable insights on environmental issues in the Nayagarh Districts.

4.3. Sample Size:

The sample size for this study consisted of 30 women from Nayagarh Districts who were interviewed. Additionally, field observations were conducted in various locations within the district. The secondary data analysis included a review of various documents and reports related to environmental initiatives in Nayagarh.

12	48	Scientist	Expert, research-driven	Extensive research	Specializes in air quality
13	38	Homemaker	Concerned and supportive	Limited involvement	Familiar with energy conservation
14	26	Student	Developing interest, eager to learn	Limited engagement	Awareness about river pollution
15	47	Activist	Advocacy and community mobilization	Leading local protests	Focus on wildlife conservation
16	30	Teacher	Supportive, interested in education	Environmental projects	Awareness about plastic pollution
17	43	Farmer	Concerned and supportive	Sustainable practices	Experience in organic farming
18	36	Journalist	Advocacy and reporting	Reporting on eco-issues	Awareness of forest conservation
19	27	NGO Worker	Passionate about conservation	Leading local initiatives	Expert in sustainable agriculture
20	51	Teacher	Supportive, interested in education	Environmental projects	Awareness about plastic pollution
21	39	Homemaker	Concerned and supportive	Limited involvement	Awareness about wildlife habitat
22	25	Student	Developing interest, eager to learn	Limited engagement	Concerned about water pollution
23	54	Activist	Advocacy and community mobilization	Organizing events	Passionate about reforestation
24	35	Teacher	Supportive, interested in education	Environmental projects	Awareness about plastic pollution
25	44	Farmer	Concerned and supportive	Limited involvement	Practices crop rotation
26	29	Journalist	Advocacy and reporting	Writing articles	Awareness of coastal erosion
27	37	NGO Worker	Passionate about conservation	Local awareness programs	Expert in waste reduction
28	48	Teacher	Expert, research-driven	Extensive research	Specializes in renewable energy
29	31	Homemaker	Concerned and supportive	Limited involvement	Awareness of urban planning
30	26	Student	Developing interest, eager to learn	Limited engagement	Interest in urban green spaces

5. ANALYSIS

5.1. Qualitative Data Analysis:

- The semi-structured interviews were transcribed, and thematic analysis was applied to identify common themes related to feminist environmentalism, women's roles in environmental conservation, and their experiences in the community.
- Field observations were documented and analyzed to provide additional context and

insights into environmental practices and activities, particularly those involving women.

5.2. Secondary Data Analysis:

- Existing literature, government reports, and documents related to environmental initiatives in Nayagarh were reviewed and analyzed to provide background information, contextualize the findings from interviews and observations, and offer supplementary data.

6. FINDINGS

From the secondary sources it was found that the tribal women of Nayagarh districts of Odisha have been practicing 'Thenga Pali' movement to safeguard the forest and its resources voluntarily. 'Thenga', means sticks and 'Pali' is explained as 'turn'. It is a practice where members from the Kodarapalli tribal village participate in protecting their community forest. This system of forest patrolling has been carried out by the women community for at least five decades. The women protect the forest from smugglers, timber thieves and people who rob the natural resources without permission. The women understand the importance of resources and their values deeply as compared to men. Earlier when Men were managing the forest, there were issues of mismanagement. They have lenient approach towards smuggler. Hence the women took over the charge of protection of forest. Due to their conservation efforts 500 acres of forest land under their protection have been rejuvenated. Under FRA, the Forest dwelling communities has claimed for Community Forest Resources Management. But their journey to get the CFR titles and recognition was not an easy walk. They have been fighting for their rights over a decade. The District Level Committee (DLC) had already approved the claim of 24 villages in 2018 and in a historic event, in 2022, 24 Villages under Ranpur block received CFR titles under FRA. Women have been protecting and conserving the forests in Nayagarh districts since 1984. They are playing vital roles in environmental conservation. They are often responsible for managing household water sources, collecting firewood, and practicing sustainable agriculture. Women also engage in activities such as tree planting, organic farming, and the promotion of eco-friendly cooking practices. Preliminary findings indicate that women in the Nayagarh districts possess a deep understanding of local ecosystems, including traditional agricultural practices and medicinal plant knowledge. They actively engage in activities such as afforestation, water management, and sustainable agriculture. They have their own traditional practices of forest management like celebrating SialiUchsav, a festival of forest conservation and regeneration because they are dependent on Siali leaves both for household consumption and selling purposes. These contributions underscore their importance in maintaining ecological balance. The study found that women in Nayagarh are disproportionately affected by environmental challenges. Climate variability and natural disasters impact women's livelihoods, health, and overall well-being. Flooding and water scarcity, for instance, can disrupt daily routines, increase care giving burdens, and jeopardize food security. It was observed that several women in Nayagarh expressed feminist

perspectives in their environmental practices. They emphasized the importance of gender equality in decision-making related to natural resources and advocated for the inclusion of women in community-level environmental initiatives.

The findings indicate that women in Nayagarh exhibit agency and empowerment in their pursuit of sustainable environmental practices. Their contributions to conservation not only benefit the environment but also empower them within their communities. They are actively engaged in execution of state level policies and schemes in collaboration with various NGOs and Govt. functionaries.

7. WAY FORWARD

This study finds the need for policy interventions that recognize and support the pivotal role of women in environmental conservation. Initiatives should aim to:

- **Promote gender-sensitive environmental policies and programs:** Promoting gender-sensitive environmental policies and programs is crucial for achieving both environmental sustainability and gender equality. By recognizing and addressing the unique needs, roles, and perspectives of women and marginalized gender groups in environmental initiatives, we can create more effective and equitable solutions. Gender-sensitive policies ensure that women have equal access to resources, decision-making processes, and opportunities in environmental conservation and management. Moreover, these initiatives can empower women to play a more active role in addressing environmental challenges, as they often bear the brunt of the adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation. Inclusivity in environmental policies not only benefits individuals but also leads to more comprehensive and innovative strategies for protecting our planet. It is imperative that governments, organizations, and communities prioritize gender sensitivity in their environmental efforts to build a more sustainable and just future for all.
- **Provide women with access to resources and training for sustainable practices:** Ensuring that women have access to resources and training for sustainable practices is a critical step towards achieving gender equality and a more sustainable future. When women are empowered with the knowledge and tools to adopt sustainable practices, they can play a significant role in addressing environmental challenges and promoting economic development. Access to resources such as land, finance, and technology is essential for women to engage in sustainable agriculture, renewable

energy initiatives, and conservation efforts. Moreover, training programs that focus on sustainable practices empower women to make informed decisions about resource management, waste reduction, and environmental preservation. By investing in women's access to these resources and training, we not only empower them but also contribute to the overall well-being of communities and the planet, fostering a more equitable and sustainable world for all.

- **Encourage women's participation in decision-making processes related to natural resource management:** Encouraging women's participation in decision-making processes related to natural resource management is not only a matter of gender equality but also a crucial step towards sustainable and effective resource governance. Women often have a unique perspective on environmental issues, stemming from their roles as primary caregivers and their close connection to the land and water resources. Their involvement ensures a more comprehensive and holistic approach to resource management. When women are included in decision-making, it leads to the development of policies and strategies that better address the needs of communities, promote environmental sustainability, and enhance social equity. Therefore, it is essential to create inclusive platforms, provide training, and actively promote the participation of women in shaping the future of our natural resources, fostering a more equitable and resilient society for all.

8. CONCLUSION

Numerous studies have shown that women in rural areas play vital roles in resource gathering, agriculture, and natural resource management. Their knowledge of local ecosystems and traditional practices can contribute significantly to environmental sustainability. However, gender disparities in access to resources and decision-making authority often limit their potential contributions. Understanding feminist environmentalism in the Nayagarh districts of Odisha reveals the untapped potential of women as agents of change in environmental conservation. By acknowledging the knowledge, agency, and contributions of women, we can move towards more sustainable and equitable environmental practices. This research sheds light on the intersection of feminist perspectives and environmentalism in the Nayagarh districts of Odisha. Women in this region play significant roles in environmental conservation, often guided by feminist principles of equity and inclusion. Acknowledging and harnessing the agency of women in environmental initiatives can lead to more effective and sustainable conservation efforts. This study serves

as a foundation for further research and policy development that promotes feminist environmentalism, not only in Nayagarh but also in similar contexts globally. Recognizing their rights over forest resources will lead to sustainable use of forest resources along with protection and preservation of forest. The existing environmental degradation and the appropriation of natural resources is the root cause of feminist environmental movement in Nayagarh famously known as "Thengali Movement" which is an inspiration for others to protect and preserve the natural resources around us. Feminist environmentalism plays a crucial role in advancing the cause of sustainable forest conservation. Empowering women to take active roles in forest management and conservation decision-making processes not only promotes gender equity but also leads to more effective and holistic conservation strategies. Women often bring unique perspectives to the table, considering the broader social and economic implications of forest management. Their involvement can lead to more sustainable and inclusive policies that benefit both the environment and local communities.

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