

# ROLE OF WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION MOVEMENTS IN KERALA

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**ABSTRACT:** Environment is the source of life system. Women and environment are closely bounded and the intimate relation between women and nature led to the emergence of theory of ecofeminism. Women are prominent contributors to environmental rehabilitation and conservation. They actively participated in environment protection than man as women are directly affected and influenced by nature than men. Kerala has a history of women participation in environment protection through governmental organization, non-governmental organizations and participation through movements such as save Silent Valley movement, Anti Coca Cola struggle and Anti Endosulfan movements with leaders as C.K Janu, Sugathakumari. Sara Joseph and Mayilamma. The women and the *adivasis* in Kerala through active participation in environmental protection movements such as quarrying mining, forest protection, agriculture and animal husbandry, water conservation upholds the need and importance of environmental protection,

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## Introduction

Women participation in environment protection is crucial as it leads to help societies to develop the sense of responsibility needed to maintain a good balance between humans and the earth's resources (U.N.O, 2002). Environmental degradation particularly affects the most vulnerable, mainly women and children who constitute the majority of the world's poor, because of this women play decisive roles in managing and preserving biodiversity, water, land and natural resources . Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observes the differences in roles of women and men in society and there by the difference of women nature and men nature relation<sup>1</sup>. This women nature relation is reflected in the core ideas of Ecofeminism from Karen Warren (1987) as there are important connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; understanding the nature of these connections is necessary to any adequate understanding of the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. Women are more related to nature than men, and the environmental degradation as well as the time of natural disaster and there after women , children and unprivileged sections are the prime victim of the exploitation along with the relation between oppression of women and the oppression of nature demands solutions to ecological problems from feminist perspective. As the participation of women in environmental protection is crucial, which is justified by ecofeminist theory, the women participation in environmental protection and movements in Kerala can also be analyzed from ecofeminist perspective.

Status of women in Kerala is high in comparison to that of women in most other parts of India. Kerala is the only Indian state in which there are more females than males. Women

<sup>1</sup> "Although at first glance, the relationship between human society and the physical environment seems to be gender neutral, affecting both women and men in a similar way, upon closer examination one realises that the relationship is not neutral. The differentiated socio-cultural construction of men and womens" roles means that the linkages between people and the physical environment impact differently on both sexes. As men and women have different roles in the family, community and work- force, they are likely to have different personal attitudes, priorities and power over resources when it comes to environmental protection. Men and women also interact differently with the environment, which provides them with different opportunities to protect it. All this requires that strategies for promoting environmental protection at the country, local and community level approach men and women differently For example, in most households women are responsible for water and waste management. However, due to their often restricted access to public positions and political participation, decisions about water and waste management systems in the community are often taken by men who not necessarily take into account the views and needs of the female household managers" (OSCE,2009).

Constitute 51 percent of Kerala's population and have higher literacy rate. They also actively participate in socio economic political and environmental activities. The Silent Valley Movement (1976) struggle against Coca Cola at Plachimada (2000), Anti-Endosulfan Movement is examples where women were actively participated. Kerala had a legacy of women participation in environment protection with leaders such as (late) Mayilamma, Sugathakumari, C.K. Janu and Sara Joseph. There is also Kerala environmentalist working outside Kerala like Medha Padkar, Priya Pillai<sup>2</sup> and Daya Bahi<sup>3</sup>, who gained attention with their environmental involvement. Women in Kerala involves in environmental protection through Governmental and NGOs.

### Women participation in environmental protection

Women in Kerala are actively participating in environment protection through Governmental as well as NGOs in Kerala. Decentralization provides opportunity for women to participate in governmental decision making through local self-government particularly at village level decentralized planning through Gram Sabah where active participation in government's environment programmes and strong opposition to the crucial environmental problems as sand mining, quarrying problems is possible.

Women in Kerala participated in environmental protection through Environmental NGOs. The women wing of Kerala *Shastra Sahitya Parishad* along with women forum and Parishad School (for women) involves in environmental conservation efforts in Kerala. through *Vanitha Kala Jatha*, seminars and classes,

Through the environmental NGO, *Thanal*, women actively campaigning for protection of rice varieties all over India. It began with the Kumbalangi Declaration<sup>4</sup> of Save Our Rice. The main partner in this campaign was Self Employed Women's Association-Kerala (SEWA). Women took part against waste dumping and anti- Endosulfan campaign of Thanal and running organic bazaar for unique varieties of rice of Kerala under its direction.

<sup>2</sup> Priya Pillai is a Keralite, who is working with Green peace, recently faced the ban on going U.K from Central Government in 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Daya Bhai (Sr.Mercy Mathew) is a social as well as environmental activist working for the upliftment of tribal people in Madya Pradesh. Her hard work created the draught prone tribal village to a land with plenty of water and paddy field with complete greenery.

<sup>4</sup> Kumbalangi declaration is a declaration which protects our rice variety as a part of "save our rice campaign", held at a place called Kumbalangi in Cochin, Kerala.

Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) is concerned about the degradation of quality of life and environment, global warming, black carbon deposits, air pollution and climate change issues that have implications on existence and survival of humanity in general and women in specific. They conducted classes on awareness of environmental protection among women. BGM Social Service Centre is another NGO, based on Trivandrum where women are taking part in environment conservation through activities such as environmental club for spreading environmental programme include planting trees, anti-plastic campaign, rainwater harvesting, and water well construction. Other environmental NGOs like, SEEK, SPEAK, *Paristhithi Samrakshana Samithi*, also by understanding the prominence of women nature relation, come up with wide platform for their active participation in environment protection and spreading environment awareness. Thus women in Kerala participates in environmental protection through Governmental and NGOs.

### Women involvement in anti –Coca Cola struggle in Plachimada

Plachimada anti- Coca Cola struggle is one of the world attracted struggle of people for the right of water against multinational company. Plachimada is a small village in Perumatty Panchayat in Palakkad District, which is confronted with acute water shortage. On

8 October 1999, Hindustan Coca Cola Beverages Private Limited (HCBPL) applied to Perumatty Panchayat for permission for setting up a bottling plant in Plachimada<sup>5</sup>. On 27 January 2000, the Panchayath granted license to Coca-Cola, for setting up and running the factory. The location of the plant was with in the area of good paddy cultivation, which needed ground water for cultivation. The company chose this area, as per the explanation given by the KSSP, was that Coca-Cola wanted to use water from the irrigation dams nearby. The exploitation of groundwater through bore wells resulted in scarcity of water source for people's daily use. As The Guardian (2003) observed,

"Sludge from this plant was being used as manure in the nearby farming fields by misleading farmers it as fertilizers, contained certain heavy metals such as lead, cadmium and chromium. Quantity and quality of the well water decreased as the water turned brackish and milky white and no longer fit for drinking, cooking and

<sup>5</sup> Some scholars like Ravi Raman (2010) argue that it was by environmental racism that the factory placed in the Midst of Adivasi Dalit colonies bathing. The chemicals from the plant's waste water were vitiated the ground water. Routine agriculture was already adversely affected hundred acres of adjacent paddy lands due to the water scarcity. People who are forced to depend upon the brackish water complain of a variety of illness. Skin diseases and stomach disorder were frequently reported. The people near the plant also suffered from air pollution".

These problem of environment pollution impelled people for agitation which began in 2002 as a blockade before the factory by Adivasi women. People formed *Coca-Cola Virudha Janakeeya Samara Samithy*<sup>6</sup> against plant, *Manushi*, a women's welfare cooperative, People's Union of Civil Liberties (PUCL), KSSP, and the *Ayyankalipada*, a pro naxalite group were strong supporters of the agitation and later joined by political party. *Navdanya* movement under leadership of Vandana Shiva supported this anti Coca- Cola movement. The agitation gain attention with its Gandhian method of satyagraha and nonviolence include rallies, marches, meeting, hunger strike in spite of lathi charges of police. It also got worldwide attention with International Water conference<sup>7</sup> held at Plachimada in 2004 and got support from international community. After the refusal of Perumatty panchayath on the renewal of permit for company along with the high court's decision to limit company's intake of water up to 5 lakhs, company caught into trouble. But the High court's decision against Perumatty panchaya's right to cancellation of the renewal of permit of company, the case went to Supreme Court. The Plachimada Coca-Cola Victims Relief and Compensation Claims Special Tribunal Bill, 2011 based on the principle of polluter pays, proposed by Left Democratic Front (LDF) Government was passed without any discussion on Feb 24th, 2011 by the 12th Assembly, which was sent for the approval by the President of India is criticized by the Union Home Ministry in 2015 and terming it unconstitutional by stating that "The State legislature does not appear to possess the necessary legislative competence to enact a law for constituting a tribunal to adjudicate

the matters arising out of the violations of the law executed by Parliament under Article 253 of the Constitution, subject matter of which does not fall under the subject matter specified in list-2 or list-3 of the seventh schedule”.

<sup>6</sup> Anti Coca Cola People's struggle movement.

<sup>7</sup> This conference was attended by environmentalists, Vandana Siva, Jose Bové, Maude Barlow as well as members of the European Parliament and activists from all over the world. This conference also participated by every Indian political parties (Shiva, 2004).

In Plachimada pregnant women, old age women and *Adivasis* were mostly suffered by shortage as well as with contaminated water and moreover, these women had to walk ten miles a day to collect drinking water. These conditions compel women to come in the forefront of anti-Coca Cola struggle. They demanded for clean drinking water and a solid livelihood for their families. They felt the need to persuade Coca Cola to quit Plachimada. *Adivasi* women were the key critics of the company as they provided the leadership for anti-Coca Cola struggle. Along with C.K Janu, an *Adivasi* leader, women from various parts of Kerala participated in the struggle. The women, dalits and *Adivasis* were presented at the struggle venue through out the day with a spirit of volunteerism to environment protection, despite physical threats from police thus became the backbone of the struggle. The leader of the movement was Mayilamma, a 65- year-old dalit woman who inspired women to participate in struggle by stated that “When you drink Coke, you drink the blood of people.” As Vandana Shiva (2006) states women in a small Indian hamlet in Kerala succeeded in shutting down a Coca-Cola plant. The presence of ecofeminist leaders like Medha Patkar and Vandana Shiva gave it lot of coverage.

As Nair (2009) states, “the participation of women in large number in Plachimada (as in Chipko) has been influenced by the impact of recent economic changes in intensifying their traditional dependence on the natural environment”. The women, dalit and *Adivasi* participation in this struggle reinforce the theory that deprived sections and women are always severely affected by environmental degradation as they are very much related with nature. The active struggle of women specially *Adivasi* and dalit women's right to safe water proves the ecofeminist emphasis on women affinity with nature as well as proves that women are more affected than men by environmental degradation as they have face burden of collection of water as well as performance of duties prescribed by patriarchal society of Kerala. On April 2003, the Perumatty panchayath revoked the license for the project. Coca cola took

the case to the Kerala High court and the legal battle lasted for years and the plant was closed permanently . However as of 2018 no compensation has been paid to the villagers. In June 2021, as the Government of Kerala approached the company and the factory was converted into a Covid First Line Treatment Centre (CFLTC)

### Women and anti- Endosulfan movement

The Kasargode District of Kerala gain worldwide attention with the tragedy of aerial spraying Endosulfan, a chemical pesticide in cashew plantations by the Plantation Corporation of Kerala for twenty years, which started in 1978 According to Rajendran (2011), “When Rachel Carson's Silent Spring was published in 1962; many did not believe her revelations on the effect of the dumping of chemicals. Decades later, her findings are similar the happenings in the highly literate state of Kerala. Poor scientific research, ignorance, and a mindless administration dumping poisonous pesticides have all collectively caused irreparable damages to the environment, and generated economic gains. Developing countries are becoming the dumping yard for pesticides that have been banned in developed countries”. From the mid of 1990s, the community living near plantations had been complaining against the spraying of Endosulfan. The congenital anomalies<sup>8</sup> and death of domestic animals and mass death of birds, bees, fishes and frogs treated as the signals of warning on the impact of the chemical spraying of Endosulfan. The aerial spray resulted in environmental as well as health destruction of people in that area. Children were found to be the worst affected with mental retardation, physical deformities, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and hydrocephalus. Men and women in the area were also affected with various chronic diseases which is difficult to treat.

Women participation in anti-Endosulfan movement is initiated by Leelakumari, who firstly started the struggle against Endosulfan with the support from NGOs of *Thanal* and *SEEK*, in turn resulted in the ban of Endosulfan in Kerala in 2005 by the official notification in gazette by Central Ministry of Kerala. A study done by Jaysree (2015) depicts the vulnerability faced by women in the area. Women are suffering from gynecological issues including menstrual problems, continuous abortions, intra uterine death (IUD)/ still birth, neonatal/ child death, genito-urinary problems, which causes them psychological as well as social stigma. Women are suffering with serious gynecological problems as Endosulfan affects pregnant women which in turn caused miscarriage or transferring of chemical to the foetus. The chemical passes to babies through breast milk which has serious consequences on baby's physical and mental growth, which resulted in psychological trauma of the women.

<sup>8</sup> Congenital anomalies are also known as birth defects, congenital disorders or congenital malformations. Congenital anomalies can be defined as structural or functional anomalies (e.g. metabolic disorders) that can be identified prenatally, at birth or later in life (WHO, 2015).

They are suffered by social stigma in the manner that the mothers of girl child are concerned with the problem hesitance of people to marry from this area. Women's confinement to family and family roles makes her more isolated socially as taking care of the patients in the household denies women, especially mothers, the opportunities for social interaction, especially considering that the patients require constant attention. It was reported that there are families with women deserted or divorced by husbands leaving disabled children with them. Women play major role in taking care of the disabled and diseased children in the family along with their household works which are double burden for them. Thus mostly women and children are affected by Endosulfan and facing alienation from social mainstream and psychological trauma, which compel women for active participation in anti- Endosulfan struggle. Thus these entire problems constitute ecofeminist aspects to the Anti Endosulfan Movement.

- Women in Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers and health workers are helping the victims by providing medicine and health care benefits. A child named Shruti was born with multiple deformities due to Endosulfan exposure in Kasargod, who now as women, is a community activist and an anti pesticide campaigner. She is the living example of womenfolk who suffered with Endosulfan spraying. Women were active participants in Endosulfan Protest Action Committee, Kasargod (*Endosulfan Virudha Samara Samithi*). Through poems, dramas, writings they are propagating anti- Endosulfan sentiments along with the need to care the victims. Thus the close analysis of anti-Endosulfan movement<sup>9</sup> with the participation of women, and children who are suffering from and more exposed to vulnerabilities to the arial spray of Endosulfan, attach to basic tenant of ecofeminism. The Kerala government banned the use of endosulfan in 2005. However neighboring states still used them. In 2011, the seventh meeting of Stockholm convention banned the use of endosulfan. In the same year the supreme court of India banned the use. In 2017 Supreme Court of
- <sup>9</sup> The awareness programme on this tragedy is on-going. Several media enquiry and case studies are also available on the issue. Exhibitions of photographs and paintings are also been organized by environment groups as well as Mathrubhumi Publishing for generating awareness on the issue. The first film “living dead” documented the victims in 2001 and there were nearly 10 documentaries which analyzed different aspects of the issue made and released on the topic. The Kerala State human rights Commission and Kerala State Legislative Committee on environment had sittings and in depth enquiry into the issue. Scheduled communities like 21 Koraga’s and other scheduled communities are worst affected, as they were more dependent on biodiversity, which increased their exposure to Endosulfan (KSCSTE, 2011). India directed to Kerala Government to pay Rs 500 crores to 5000(Rs 5 lakhs each) to all victims of the endosulfan tragedy

### Women participation in Save Silent Valley movement

As Agarwal, Narain, & Srabani (1999) observes People’s struggle against big dams has been one of the most prominent phenomena on the socio cultural and political canvas of the country during the past two decades. Anti-dam struggles have managed to create an atmosphere that is more receptive to issues like displacement and environmental impacts.” In response to the large corporate projects that threaten to affect the basic human rights to water, land and dislocating people from their ecological system, the environmental movements have emerged in Kerala. One of anti-dam movement, which paved for the new beginning of ecological awareness and environmentalism in Kerala, is Silent Valley<sup>10</sup> Movement. Silent Valley forest, which situated in Palghat District of Kerala, is enriched with rare species and flora fauna, where, several specimens that have become extinct elsewhere are found. The Zoological Survey of India has identified several rare and endangered faunal species including butterflies, birds, fish, amphibians, reptiles and mammals in the silent valley. Many insects and birds like the 67 black orange flycatcher, the white browed bulbul, the hill myna and hornbills along with three endangered mammals: the lion tailed macaque; the tiger and the Nilgiri tahr are also found here. The lion tailed macaque is one of the most endangered mammals in the world. The categorization of Silent Valley as important biodiversity hotspot in Southern end of Western Ghats in Kerala attracted the environmentalists, with regard to the environment versus development debate.

With a view to hydroelectric power project in the Silent Valley forest, Government of Kerala’s decided to build a dam across the Kunthipuzha in 1973, which confronted with protest from environmentalist, artists, scientists, academicians, NGOs such as KSSP, SEEK, Save Silent Valley Committee in Bombay, and especially from *Prakrithi Samrakshana Samiti*, an association of writers, and women. The Save Silent Valley Movement becomes active in 1976.

<sup>10</sup> The name Silent Valley is asserted by the lack of crickets in the forest. The Silent Valley is associated with the mythological character of Draupadi who was also known as Sairandhri. The river Kunthipuzha, is named after Kunthi Devi, the mother of the Pandavas. It is believed that the Pandavas together with their consort spent a considerable part of their vanavasa or life in the forest here (Nair, Thampi & Babu, 1999).

Women actively participated in Save Silent Valley Movement. Sugathakumari through her poems motivated people to the primacy of environmental conservation. Through poems Sugathakumari asserted women affinity with nature by observing nature as „Mother and remind about protection of nature from destruction as our primary duty as children. Her poem “*Marathinu Stuti*”(Hymn to the Tree), which revolves on the discourse on forest destruction, become the official song of *Prakrithi Samrakshana samithi*. According to Rohit (2012), the disturbing image of the majestic tree wearing on its “broad chest, the stains caused by our axe” was able to elicit massive emotional identification with the ideals of the anti Silent Valley Hydroelectric Power movement. Even though the project offered job opportunities and electrification, people, especially women protested and prioritized the conservation of silent valley forest. Despite of Silent Valley forest is not occupied by any people<sup>11</sup>, in the outskirts of reserve forest lives the indigenous tribes, who were concerned with loss of collection of forest produces and destruction of biodiversity with the materialization of hydro eclectic power project, which compel them to join the protests. The involvement of women and tribal population in Save Silent Valley Movement along with victory of the cause of endangered species proved the fact that the bio-sphere and marginalized has the same right to live on earth, which in turn assert the fact of marginalized people’s and non human being connection and right in nature, and the tenant that non eco friendly development inversely affect the marginalized which all resemble the basic tenant of ecofeminism. Thus it rewrite the illusion of big dams are the symbol of development and Silent Valley project came to halt by initiative of Indira Gandhi, in 1983, which marked the success of environment over development thus reinforce the basic right of marginalized and bio sphere.

<sup>11</sup> The Save Silent Valley Movement is for protection of biodiversity from ecological sense. It did not included problem of

displacement of settlement, as there were no communities living in the forests, unlike many other dam construction projects (Sarabhai, Jain, & Raghunathan, 2002). The movement created public awareness that the development which harms the environment will adversely affect the social and economic life of the future generations.

#### Conclusion

Across the regions and cultures of the world, women play critical roles in relation to their natural environment. Often deeply dependent on available natural resources for food, fuel and shelter, women can be particularly vulnerable to environmental changes or threats. Because women's workload is often centered on managing natural resources, biodiversity and ecosystems, their experiences and perspectives are essential to sustainable development, policymaking and actions at every level, for a healthy planet for generations to come.

Environment degradation is crucial problem. Women and environment are closely bounded and they are actively participating in protection of environment. Women are prominent actors and contributors to environmental rehabilitation and conservation. Kerala has a history of women participation in environment protection. The Silent Valley Movement, Struggle against Coca Cola at Plachimada, Anti Endosulfan movement are important examples. The movements under the leadership of Sugatha Kumari, Sara Joseph,

C.K. Janu and Mayilamma and various Environmental NGOs encourage the Kerala women's participation to protect environment.

The environmental protection activities of *Kudumbasree*, Self Help Group, Agriculture and animal husbandry, Kitchen gardens, Forest protection, Water conservation, the Non Governmental Organization's activities, female students club at schools and collages indicates the important role played by women and *Adivasis* in environment protection. The study on the women participation in environment protection thus becomes important. The study concentrated on the movements, institutions, and activities of women in environment protection and challenges faced by them and the possible prospects in their activities to improve environmental protection efforts.

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