



Shakti and Ecofeminism: An Indic Perspective to realise Sustainable Living

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ABSTRACT

In Contemporary times, ecological crises and climate change has become a Global issue, though a non-security threat but seen as destroyer of economies and life forms in future. Mother Nature has been severely exploited by the Anthropogenic activities, similarly the females all over the world have been subdued and suppressed by the male force. For this, different waves of Feminism came to counter the patriarchy, not only for the upliftment of women but also the equality of the two genders. Further came another strand of Feminism in the form of Ecofeminism, to protect both the nature and feminine spirit from the patriarchy and exploitation. The objective of this paper is to delve into the Indic concept of Shakti translating to not just power but the primordial, dynamic, creative, feminine energy that sustains, nurtures, and transforms the universe and proves as a foundational framework for sustainable living by aligning itself with an eco-feminist perspective. The paper explores ancient Indian texts like the Rig Veda where the role of women in Vedic times is portrayed, the Prithvi Sukta of Atharva Veda, works on Indus Valley Civilisation where we find the great importance given to nature as well as the mother Goddess to modern works of ecofeminism activists like Vandana Shiva, movements like Chipko and Appiko movements to understand the Indian ethics that promote sustainable living and the important contribution of women, the Shakti, the feminine force who is responsible for preservation of this planet. Terming the water bodies and other landforms as female since ancient times like Ma Ganga since Mahabharata shows that Indic culture reflects ecological and feminist consciousness. The study also scrutinizes the slight difference between Western Ecofeminism and Indic Ecofeminism. In conclusion, the paper advocates that re-engaging with the concept of Shakti can contribute to sustainable living models rooted in fostering growth, nurturing, care reciprocity, and ecological balance along with upliftment of both feminine power and ecological power.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary times, the accelerating ecological crisis and climate change have emerged as pressing global concerns, threatening not only environmental stability but also social and economic systems. Although often categorised as non-traditional security threats, their long-term implications for human survival are profound.

Across cultures, nature has been symbolically understood as Mother Nature—a life-giving, nurturing force—closely associated with the feminine principle. Yet, this nurturing entity has been relentlessly exploited through anthropogenic activities, mirroring the historical subjugation of women under patriarchal structures. It is within this context that feminist discourses evolved, eventually giving rise to ecofeminism, which critiques the interconnected domination of women and nature.

Against predominantly Western ecofeminist frameworks, the Indic worldview offers a distinctive perspective rooted in the concept of Shakti—the primordial, dynamic, and creative feminine energy that sustains the universe.

Drawing upon Indian Knowledge Systems, ancient texts, and lived traditions, this paper explores how Shakti functions as an ethical and philosophical foundation for sustainable living. By examining scriptures, historical practices, and modern ecological movements, the study portrays Shakti as both ecological consciousness and social force, capable of addressing contemporary sustainability challenges



Fig no. 1: Françoise d'Eaubonne

ECOFEMINISM

Straightaway jumping on the topic, it is important to understand what exactly Ecofeminism is. For the past few centuries, we have seen both women and nature being exploited by men and till now in many areas we still find women being subordinated, dominated, and exploited by men and since time immemorial we see the nature being overused, exploited and damaged by all human beings to fulfil their self-interest, to build their houses, industries and factories and set up many infrastructure projects. Environment Protection has become a Global Issue on which all countries are investing because if further temperature increases, it might lead to large scale destruction and even end the 6th mass extinction along with end of life on earth. Therefore, Conference of Parties (COP), meetings of UNEP, UNFCCC etc and involvement of Climate Change which covers Environment protection in SDGs as SDG13 have shown that we are trying to redo what wrong we did. Different waves of Feminism rose in the West from 19th Century onwards and Ecofeminism appeared during the late Second wave Feminism. The term was coined by *Françoise d'Eaubonne* in 1974 in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort (Feminism or Death)*. Ecofeminism is defined as the recognition of interlinking of the

suppression, oppression and domination of women and the destruction of and that the patriarchal system of domination is mainly responsible for such condition of both nature and women. Though the term was coined first in the west, the ecofeminist principles are embedded in Indian philosophy since ancient times and form the important part of Indian Knowledge System. Shakti does not refer only to the female goddess Durga or form of Parvati to be worshipped; she is the metabolic force and nurturing energy of the biosphere. Indian ecofeminism, therefore, is not an 'ism' copied from the West, but a revival of the ecological consciousness that views the Earth as a living and breathing entity and not a commodity.



Fig no. 2: Shakuntala Rao Shastri

CONDITION OF WOMEN IN VEDIC AGE

Shakuntala Rao Shastri in her book *Women in the Vedic Age* describes the condition of Women during Vedic times. In first few pages we see, a couple is shown washing and pressing soma juice, plucking the sacred grass for sacrifices and a glimpse of home life in Rig Vedic age where couple lived in harmony and helped each other in daily routine work. She also mentions the importance of women in married life both in household and in religious ceremony and sacrifices. Though we find that there are prayers in Rig Veda for sons to be born and not daughters which shows deep orthodox mentality but many say these prayers were later added to Rig Veda. We find polygamy not in vogue at that time which shows respect given to the wife instead of having multiple wives. There was presence of Intellectual Equality where both genders were eligible for the Upanayana samskara and had the right to study the Vedas equally as men. There were two types of women scholars- Brahnavadinis who were lifelong seekers of truth and had devoted their life to it and Sadyodvahas who were those who studied until they got married i.e. around 16-17 years at that time. She has also highlighted famous women scholars like Gargi, Maitreyi, Ghosha, Apala, Lopamudra and many more who composed many hymns in the Rig Veda. Women had the freedom to choose their husband through Svayamvara. Upon marriage, she was given the position of Samrajni or Queen holding authority over the household.

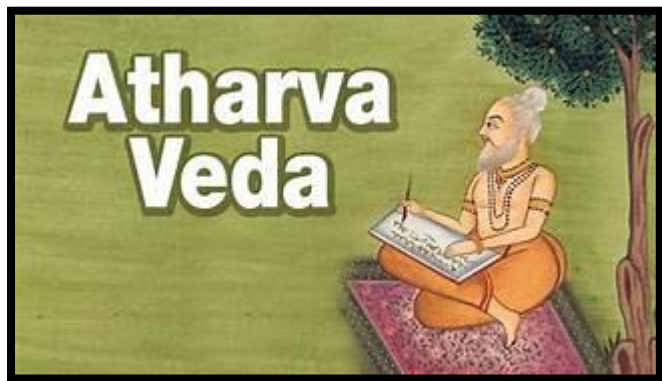


Fig no. 3: Atharva Veda, below the Bhumi Sukta is a part of Atharva Veda

INDIC WORLDVIEW OF NATURE:

We can find Indic Worldview of nature explained beautifully in the Bhakti Sukta of the Atharva Veda:

असंबाधं बध्यतो मानवानां यस्या उद्धतः प्रवतः समं बहु ।

नानावीर्या ओषधीर्या बिभर्ति पृथिवी नः प्रथतां राध्यतां नः ॥२॥

The verse here states the reverence of the Earth as our mother nature and the nurturing mother who allows her children, all human and all living beings to live freely across her different landscapes like the mountains, slopes and plains. She bears and provides us with many plants, medicinal herbs and blessings for our healthy and prosperous life.

यस्यां समुद्र उत सिन्धुरापो यस्यामन्नं कृष्टयः संबभूवुः ।

यस्यामिदं जिन्वति प्राणदेजत्सा नो भूमिः पूर्वपेये दधातु ॥३॥

Here again the verse starts by revering the Mother Earth who has held together the Ocean and Rivers along with source of food i.e. the land, the soil which is ploughed to grow crops. In her is alive all the lives and may she grant us and bless us with that life. In Her Ocean and River Waters are woven together and she when ploughed gives out food for us to eat.

यस्यां पूर्वे पूर्वजना विचक्रिरे यस्यां देवा असुरानभ्यवर्तयन् ।

गवामश्नानां वयसश्च विष्टा भगं वर्चः पृथिवी नो दधातु ॥५॥

The Mother Earth is revered again as in her our ancestors had lived and performed rituals and lived their lives, in her the Devas had defeated and overturned the Asuras, In her animals like Cows, horses, birds etc have lived since a long time and hence, may she bestow on us blessings to live a prosperous and splendid life.

विश्वंभरा वसुधानी प्रतिष्ठा हिरण्यवक्षा जगतो निवेशनी ।

वैश्वानरं बिभ्रती भूमिरग्निमिन्द्रऋषभा द्रविणे नो दधातु ॥६॥

The respected mother earth is Vishwambhara or the sustainer of all, she is All-Bearing, She is Vasudha which means the source, the Producer of all Wealth, She is Pratishtha or the foundation on which we all live, She is Hiranyavaksha or the golden or radiant Earth who is the primary source of life, wealth, and nourishment. She is the place where we all dwell. She holds the Vaishvanara (The Universal Fire) within Her, the Fire which empowers Indra and Rishabha. May the Mother Earth grant and bless us with splendour of that Fire and make us strong.

The Bhoomi Sukta worships and reveres the Earth or Bhoomi not just as a planet but as our mother who sustains all beings without discrimination. She is described as the source of food, medicine, shelter, and many things which contribute to a healthy and a prosperous life. She is the one who upholds the Dharma, the symbol of moral balance and righteous duties and responsibility. Humans while conversing with her seek forgiveness for exploiting her. At the end it teaches us a lesson that we all belong to the Mother Earth and we must be grateful to her for making our life possible with all the resources she provides and nurtures us just like our human mother and hence we all must live with gratitude and care without exploiting the nature and mother earth.

Hence, we can see here how since the Vedic times the concept of feminine force in her motherly form resided both in the Prithvi, one of the 5 elements of Panchatatva as mother nature or mother Earth and in human form as well.

SHAKTI AS ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS:

In the Linga Purana, we find that the entire universe began with the unmanifest and will end with the gross elements originated from it. That Saivi Prakrti, the creator of the universe is known as aja (the unborn). Prakrti, when observed by Siva became Saivi O brahmins, aja is referred as the mother of many. This Prakrti is the creator of worlds when she is presided over by Purusa.

या देवी सर्वभूतेषु शक्ति-रूपेण संस्थिता।
नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमस्तस्यै नमो नमः॥

This shloka from Devi Mahamtya of Markandeya Upanishad tell us that Shakti, the divine entity is not merely a female Goddess, rather she is the cosmic energy who resides and dwells in every life form as inner energy, strength, and dynamism. Repetition of the word “*namastasyai*” or salutations to her emphasizes respect and reverence to the universal feminine power present in all existence. Since the industrial revolution began in Europe and late spread to other parts of the world, nature was seen as commodity, an asset which could be used for industrial development, trade and to earn profit. Hence, the nature was cruelly exploited by the hands of humans, especially men who treated the nature similar to how they treated the females, subjugated, and suppressed. In case of India, since earlier times and till now, mother nature is seen not as a commodity or entity but in the form of Shakti. Though, Shakti resides in all life forms, it also resides in nature and hence reflects ecological consciousness.

We see that in our ancient texts all the rivers are linked with a feminine energy, be it Ma Ganga, Yamuna, or Saraswati. Moreover, the Earth, again is seen as incarnation or manifestation of Goddess Lakshmi as Bhudevi who was in danger when the Asura Hiranyaksha abducted her and dragged her to the bottom of the cosmic ocean, this resembles how some men or patriarchy ruthlessly exploit the Prakriti in which they live without realizing their importance, moreover dragging Bhudevi, a feminine energy, Shakti shows exploitation of women simultaneously by Asuras forming the patriarchy. Danger to Prithvi or Bhudevi meant danger to all life forms and hence Vishnu took the Varaha avatar to save her which resembles that after exploitation, finally we try to save the source of our origin and nurturing by Shakti residing in Prakriti. As Vandana Shiva says, “*The abuse of the Earth is the ecological crisis.*” shows that abusing or exploiting the power or Shakti both in the form of cosmic energy residing in all life forms and the feminine energy would lead to mass destruction and ecological crisis and we don’t know like before will any Varaha avatar come to save us or not.

We see in epics like Ramayana where Ma Sita is born from the land, King Janaka was ploughing which shows we all are born from the womb of this Prithvi in whom resides the Shakti, the feminine, divine, cosmic and all forms of power and energy. In Mahabharata, we see Draupadi born from Fire of a Yajna which shows that she was born from one of the Panchatatva of the Nature. We see Goddess Ganga who became the wife of Shantanu, so much respect for her that in the cleft of rock in Mahabalipuram, Arjun does penance and prays to Ganga so that he can acquire the weapons to fight the war at Kurukshetra. We see how Goddess Yamuna who herself had Shakti residing in her used to nurture the people of Barsana, Mathura and Vrindavan and when exploited by Kalia Naag saw its death by Shri Krishna’s Kalia Naag Mardan. In Ancient Indian texts we find the mention



of Goddess Tulsi in her human form back then and her medicinal plant form alive till now which shows convergence of Shakti and Nature.

In Kalidasa's *Abhijnanshakuntalam*, we find Shakuntala when being raised by Sage Kanva used to treat the plants as sisters and the fawns as her children. Moreover, she used to refuse to drink water until the trees and plants had been watered and their leaves were not to be plucked which shows the quality of Shakti in her as a nurturing and caring mother. Moreover, on the other hand King Dushyanta came to the forest for hunting and was about to kill a deer until a Sage stopped him as it belonged to the hermit. This shows the patriarchal, male chauvinism and dominance of ancient times when men, straightaway entering the forest used to start hunting the nature just for fun, it hasn't been long that an Olympic Game named Live Pigeon Shooting is now banned, though it too showed how humans are solely responsible for devastation of the nature.

CONVERGENCE OF SHAKTI AND ECOFEMINISM

माता भूमिः पुत्रोहं पृथिव्याः। नमो माता पृथिव्यै नमो माता पृथिव्यै॥

This shloka from Atharva Veda means that The Earth is my mother, I am her son. Salutations to mother Earth. This, shows how the unexploited nature and earth in the past was deeply revered and respected. Since the later Vedic Age, the condition of women started to deteriorate with discrimination entering in, no education for her, later practice of Sati which meant ending the life of wife if her husband died etc shows how women were being crushed down upon by men and patriarchy, who were also responsible for damage to this nature in whom Shakti resides. The time when Shakti and Ecofeminism converged when rules were laid down to protect both women and nature from dominant forces as Dharma of the King in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. He also wrote about the establishment of *Abhayaranyas* or sanctuaries like of present times where animals were to be kept safe and not hunted. Women, who since the later Vedic Age were not even considered to rule or get share of wealth, according to Chanakya were to own wealth in the form of Stridhan, though later men again exploited her by snatching her Stridhan and pressurizing her with dowry. At a point of time, even culture became important over the daughters leading men and families even kill their daughter in name of honour known as honour killing.

In *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India* originally a Kannada folktale told by women and written by AK Ramanujan, we see the protagonist having the ability to transform into a flowering tree earlier to earn some money as she was poor, but later when the prince of that kingdom saw her creative ability, he married her and asked her to repeat the process again so that they could sleep on a flower bed. Seeing this, her sister-in-law too asked her to transform into a flowering tree but when the former plucked her flower, broke her stem and didn't follow the steps told by her, she was grievously injured and disabled and only at the end with the help of proper procedure and aid by her husband was able to regain her original form. This shows how we exploit both nature and women, the Shakti residing in the nature. When we hurt or exploit Nature, it means we are exploiting Shakti too and inviting danger upon ourselves as when nature is benevolent and with caring and motherly love, we don't give it appropriate respect and intimidate her power. We forget that the nature from which we are born can also destroy us.



Basically, just like the Advaita Vedanta philosophy given by Adi Shankaracharya, Shakti and Prakriti, both are the same, they are not dual or dvaita but Advaita. Moreover, Shakti resides in males as well as the females, the Ardhanarishvara avatar of Shiva and Shakti signify the importance of both male and female where both are equal and no side can dominate the other, it is non- dual, the power or shakti likes on both sides equally and hence neither side should not exploit the nature or feminine power and promote empowerment of both. We say in contemporary times that we must adopt Sustainable Development as was also one of the outcomes of Rio Summit of 1992 which means Fulfilling the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to fulfil their needs, we see our selfish and materialistic interests here too, just to fulfil our needs we need to carefully utilise the nature. Instead, it must be reviving and rejuvenating the mother nature, the shakti to enable the survival of future generations because once the nature starts destruction, it doesn't stop unless an avatar or cosmic force takes birth to secure the planet.

SHAKTI INSPIRED MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE LIVING

A Shakti-inspired model of sustainable living is firmly anchored in Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), which view humans as integral participants within a living ecological order rather than external controllers of nature (Radhakrishnan, 1951). In Indic philosophy, Shakti denotes the dynamic, regenerative force inherent in Prakriti, while Purusha remains inert without it—a foundational idea articulated in Samkhya and Shakta traditions (Radhakrishnan, 1951). This ontological vision foregrounds balance, interdependence, and regeneration as the ethical basis of sustainability.

IKS articulate ecological responsibility through concepts such as *Rta* (cosmic order), *Dharma* (moral obligation), and *Aparigraha* (non-accumulation), which collectively promote restraint and intergenerational accountability (Atharva Veda, Prithvi Sukta). The Prithvi Sukta of the Atharva Veda portrays Earth as a nurturing mother whose resources must be safeguarded rather than exploited, offering an early moral framework for sustainable living grounded in duty rather than regulation (Atharva Veda, Prithvi Sukta). Unlike contemporary sustainability models that rely heavily on technological or market-based interventions, the Shakti framework integrates ethical consciousness, cultural practice, and ecological knowledge (Shiva, 1988).

This worldview is historically embodied by women philosophers such as Gargi Vachaknavi, a prominent Vedic seer of ancient India. Gargi's participation in philosophical debates recorded in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad reflects an epistemic tradition where women were recognised as knowledge-producers, engaging critically with questions of cosmic order and existence (Radhakrishnan, 1951). Her intellectual agency reinforces the Indic understanding of feminine wisdom as foundational to cosmic and social balance.

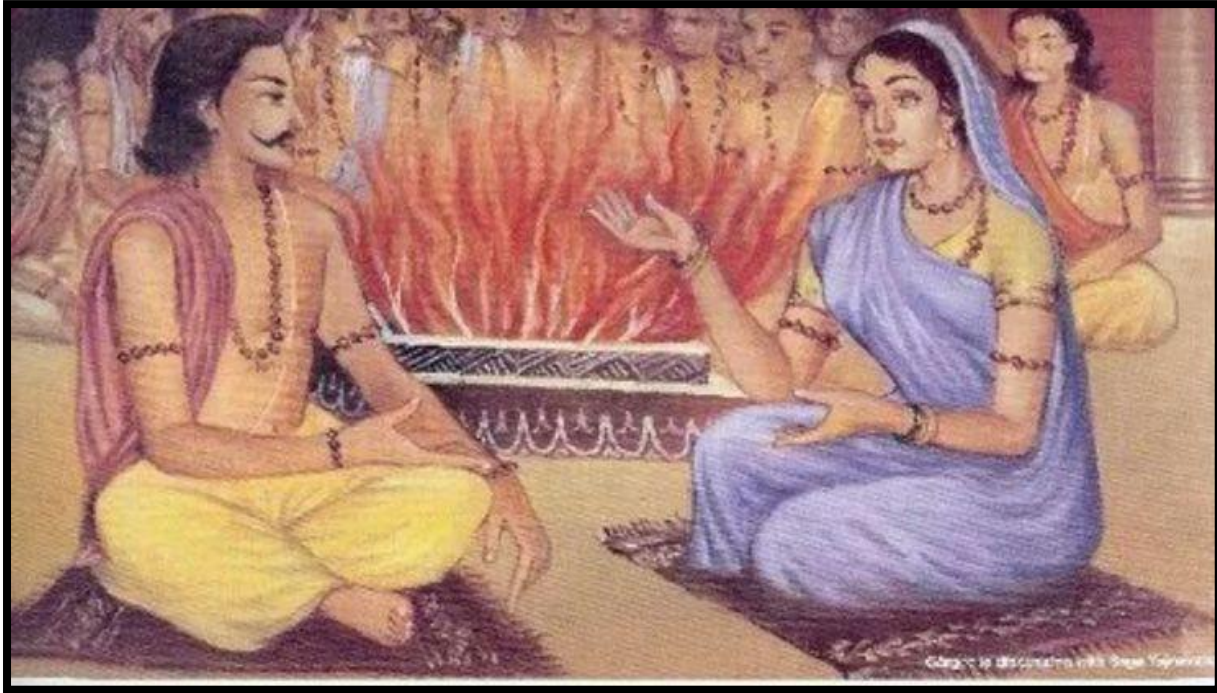


Fig no.4: Gargi Vachaknavi – India's first woman philosopher who 'shut up' men in King Janaka's court.

In modern times, this philosophy finds expression in Gaura Devi's leadership during the Chipko Movement (1973), where women resisted commercial deforestation by protecting forests central to subsistence and ecological stability. As Guha (1989) notes, Chipko exemplifies India's "environmentalism of the poor," rooted in survival ethics and local ecological knowledge rather than elite conservationism.

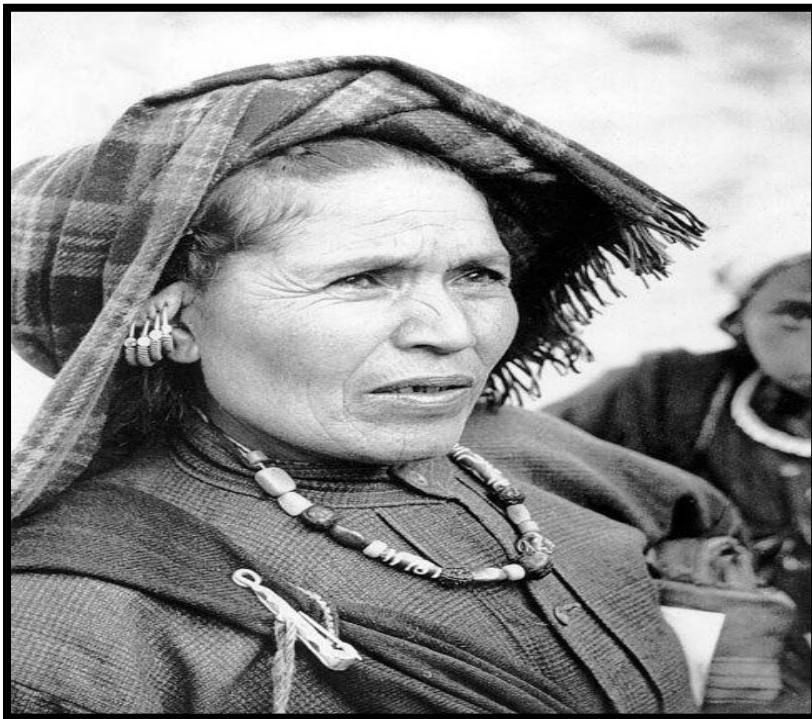


Fig no.5: Gaura Devi (1935-1991), the leader of the Chipko movement in 1970s.

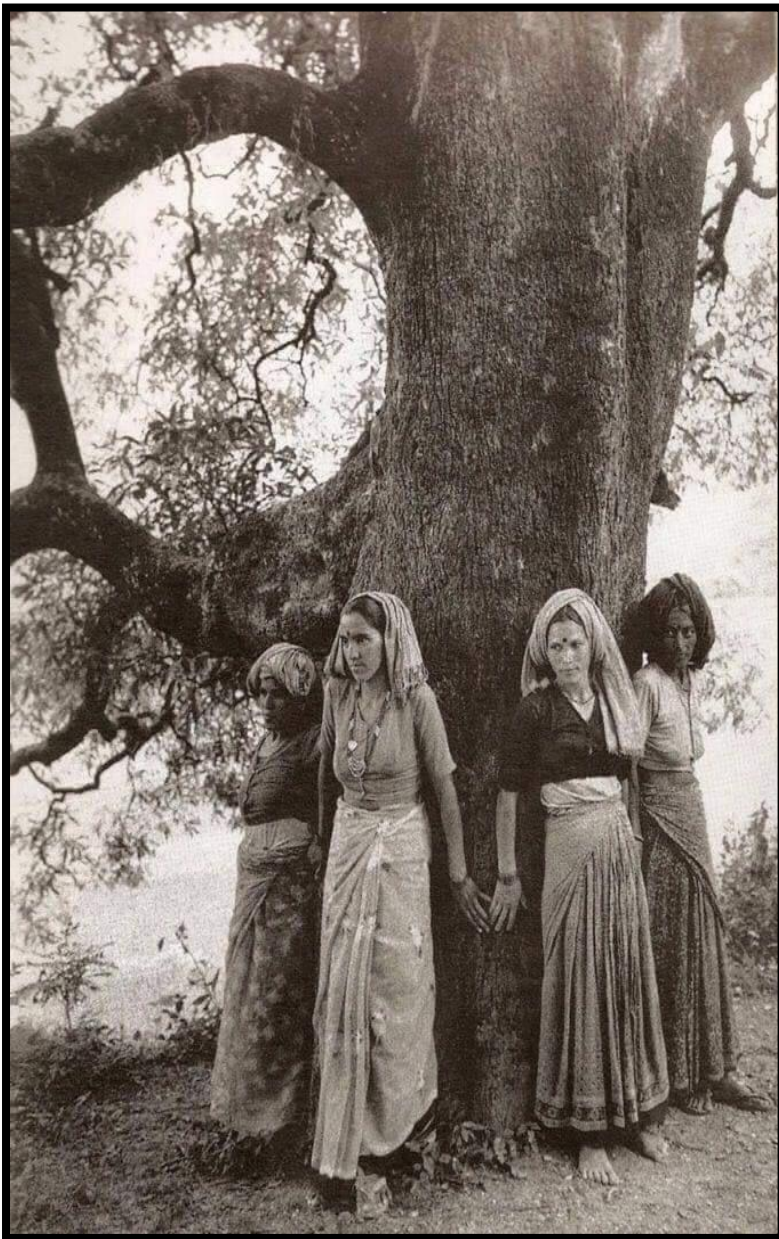


Fig no. 6: Women hugging trees during the Chipko movement.



Fig no.7 : Amrita Devi resisting cutting of Khejari Trees in Bishnoi Movement in 1700s.



Fig no.8: Wangari Maathai (April 1, 1940 -September 25, 2011) was a Kenyan social, environmental, and political activist and the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.



Fig no.9: During the Green Belt Movement Wangari Mithai planted trees with communities to protect the environment in Kenya.

While Western ecofeminism often emerges as a reaction to industrial capitalism and environmental degradation (Merchant, 1980), the Indic Shakti model is civilisational and integrative, embedding ecological ethics within everyday life (Shiva, 1988). Moreover, The mother earth law, which is a Bolivian legislation

dedicated to sustainable development, respects the balance of human life and the natural environment. It prioritizes the rights and knowledge of the country's majority indigenous population, and its stated objective is integral development in harmony and balance with Mother Earth to Live Well.

At the policy level, India's National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) operationalises aspects of this model by integrating women's collectives into watershed management, sustainable agriculture, and natural resource governance (Government of India, NRLM). However, feminist scholars caution against uncritical celebration of women's ecological roles. Agarwal (2010) argues that sustainability initiatives must ensure that ecological responsibility is matched with rights, resources, and institutional support. A Shakti-inspired model grounded in IKS must therefore unite ethical traditions with gender-equitable governance, offering a culturally rooted yet critically informed pathway to sustainable living.

CASE STUDY

a) Indigenous women as agents of environmental change

Since early times, Khasi women have played a pivotal role in nature preservation in Meghalaya. It is believed that in the Mawphlang sacred forest in the East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya, a local female deity, Labasa, protects the flora and fauna from external perils. Legends connected with the forest also mention that the forest was initially ruled by the Blah clan, who were looking for a person to protect the forest. Later, they found a woman with a son. The woman promised to allow her son to use it for the purpose on the condition that she would plant five saplings, which, if grown into trees, would be taken over by her son. The Khasi community believes that the deity named 'Labasa' would be annoyed if any natural elements were harmed within the forest. Such instances certainly indicate Khasi women's close association with nature (Dutta, 1982).



Fig no.10 : Mawphlang literally meaning 'moss covered stone' is Meghalaya's sacred forest from where you can't take away even a leaf.

b) Eco feminism in three Tollywood films

Ecofeminism links the exploitation of women with the domination of nature, challenging patriarchy and advocating equality and sustainability. Tollywood films like Padaharella Vayasu (1978), Osey! Ramulamma (1998) and 36 Vayasulo (2015) powerfully reflect this perspective. Padaharella Vayasu portrays the innocence and objectification of a young woman, Malli, paralleling her suffering with animal cruelty, thereby symbolising the shared vulnerability of women and nature. Osey! Ramulamma presents radical ecofeminism through the struggle of a Dalit woman against feudal patriarchy, highlighting caste, gender oppression, and resistance, much like nature's resilience after destruction. 36 Vayasulo represents vegetarian ecofeminism by emphasising organic farming and women's self-realisation, showing how nurturing nature empowers women socially and emotionally. Together, these films depict women as resilient forces of change, advocating ecological balance, self-respect, and social justice.



Fig no. 11: Theatrical poster of 'Padaharella Vayasu' (1978).

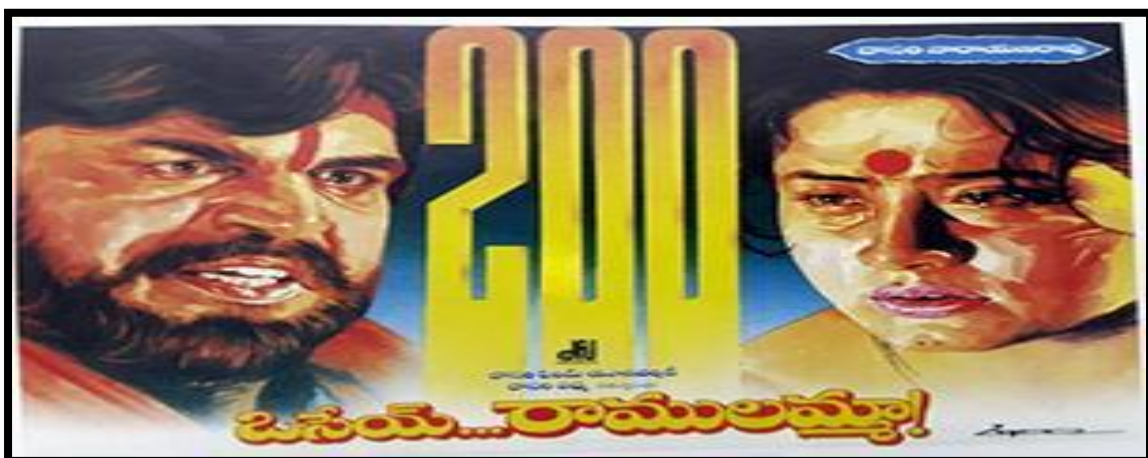


Fig no.12 :Theatrical poster of 'Osey! Ramulamma'(1998).

Comparatively, similar ecofeminist praxis can be observed in Kenya's Green Belt Movement, led by Wangari Maathai, which mobilised rural women to plant over 50 million trees, linking environmental restoration with women's empowerment and livelihood security (Maathai, 2003)



Fig no. 13: Theatrical poster of '36 Vayasulo' (2015).

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

While the Shakti-inspired model of sustainable living offers a culturally rooted and ethically rich framework, it is not without limitations. One major critique lies in the romanticisation of women–nature associations, which can unintentionally reinforce gendered expectations that burden women with disproportionate ecological responsibility (Agarwal, 2010). Treating women as “natural caretakers” of the environment risks overlooking structural inequalities related to land rights, access to resources, and decision-making power.

Further, translating philosophical principles such as Dharma and Aparigraha into contemporary policy frameworks remains challenging. Modern development models driven by market forces and extractive economics often conflict with the restraint-based ethics of Indian Knowledge Systems (Shiva, 1988). Government initiatives inspired by community participation sometimes instrumentalise women's labour without ensuring long-term empowerment or institutional support.

Comparatively, while models like Kenya's Green Belt Movement demonstrate scalable success, their effectiveness relies heavily on sustained political backing and financial resources (Maathai, 2003). Therefore, a Shakti-based sustainability model must move beyond symbolic invocation of tradition and be critically reinterpreted to address present-day socio-economic realities, ensuring that ecological ethics are aligned with gender justice and inclusive governance.



CONCLUSION

The exploration of Shakti through an ecofeminist lens reveals that sustainability, within the Indic tradition, is not merely a developmental strategy but a way of life grounded in balance, reciprocity, and reverence for nature. The convergence of Shakti and ecofeminism highlights an alternative paradigm that challenges extractive, domination-driven models of development. From Vedic hymns and goddess traditions to grassroots movements led by women and state-supported sustainability initiatives, the Indic worldview consistently underscores the interdependence of ecological and social well-being.

However, for a Shakti-inspired model of sustainable living to remain relevant, it must move beyond symbolic representations and engage critically with contemporary realities of gender inequality, governance, and economic pressures. Reinterpreted thoughtfully, Shakti offers a powerful ethical framework that integrates ecological responsibility with gender justice. Re-engaging with this indigenous wisdom can contribute meaningfully to sustainable futures that are inclusive, resilient, and rooted in cultural consciousness—where the empowerment of women and the preservation of nature are seen not as parallel goals, but as intrinsically interconnected.

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