

Ecofeminism and Indigenous Wisdom: Culture, Care, and the Commons

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ABSTRACT:

The paper explores the relationship between ecofeminism and indigenous wisdom in India's cultural and ecological landscape. It highlights the importance of indigenous communities' spiritual and practical connection with nature, viewing the environment as a shared commons requiring collective stewardship. Ecofeminism in India emphasizes the oppression of women and nature, advocating for a holistic approach that recognizes women, particularly rural and indigenous women, as key custodians of ecological knowledge and sustainable practices. The study examines how indigenous practices, such as reverence for Mother Earth and agricultural biodiversity, contribute to ecological resilience and social equity. The paper argues for a culturally grounded framework of environmental care that challenges extractive paradigms and supports community-led conservation efforts.

KEYWORDS:

Ecofeminism, Indigenous, Wisdom, Culture, Care.

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Introduction:

India, home to a diverse and complex ecological and cultural landscape, has over 104 million Scheduled Tribes, constituting 8.6% of the population. These indigenous communities have historically maintained a symbiotic relationship with their natural environment through sustainable practices rooted in cultural and spiritual traditions. Ecofeminism, a framework linking the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women, finds resonance in India, where rural and tribal women are often frontline custodians of natural resources.

Ecofeminism in India highlights the intertwined struggles for gender equality and environmental justice. Women, especially in indigenous and rural settings, rely heavily on natural resources for their livelihoods, from collecting water and fuelwood to practicing traditional agriculture. About 65% of rural Indian women are involved in agriculture and allied activities, making their role crucial but often undervalued.

Indigenous wisdom in India manifests in numerous cultural practices,

such as the protection of sacred groves, traditional water harvesting techniques, and agroforestry systems. These practices conserve biodiversity and strengthen social cohesion and resilience against environmental challenges like climate change and deforestation. Rapid industrialization, urbanization, and agricultural commercialization threaten these age-old systems, often marginalizing indigenous peoples and women from decision-making processes. Integrating ecofeminist perspectives with indigenous knowledge systems offers a transformative approach to environmental governance, focusing on culture, care, and collective stewardship of natural resources.

Background of the study

India's ecological and cultural diversity is deeply connected to its indigenous communities, who have maintained harmonious relationships with nature for centuries. These communities, comprising over 700 tribes, have rich traditional knowledge systems emphasizing stewardship of the environment, collective management of natural resources, and spiritual reverence for the Earth. Their practices, such as conservation of sacred groves and sustainable water management, play a vital role in maintaining biodiversity and ecological balance. Ecofeminism, a growing discourse, critiques the dual oppression of women and nature under patriarchal and capitalist systems. In India, women, especially in rural and tribal settings, are both vulnerable to environmental degradation and vital agents of ecological care.

Despite their central role, women and indigenous peoples often remain marginalized in mainstream environmental governance due to industrialization, deforestation, and large-scale development projects. This study aims to address environmental degradation and social inequities in India through inclusive and culturally relevant frameworks. The intersection of ecofeminism and indigenous wisdom offers a holistic approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness of gender, culture, and ecology, challenging dominant paradigms that prioritize exploitation over care.

India's commitment to international environmental agreements and sustainable development goals underscores the importance of integrating grassroots perspectives into environmental policies. By examining the synergy between ecofeminist theory and indigenous practices, this study seeks to highlight alternative pathways for environmental governance that promote equity, resilience, and the protection of commons.

Literature Review

State-Level Studies (India)

Studies at the state level have shown the significant role of indigenous women in natural resource management. For example, in Kerala, tribal women are involved in sustainable forest resource use, focusing on medicinal plants and biodiversity conservation. In Rajasthan, traditional water conservation systems, like Johads, are managed by women's collectives, reviving drought-prone areas through community-based stewardship. In Northeast states like Nagaland and Mizoram, indigenous communities maintain agroforestry practices, integrating cultural rituals and ecological preservation, with women playing a central role in seed saving and sustainable farming.

National-Level Studies (India-wide)

At the national scale, ecofeminism has emerged as an important analytical lens to understand the relationship between gender, ecology, and social justice in India. Scholars such as Vandana Shiva (1989, 2016) have been instrumental in articulating the connection between women's oppression and environmental degradation, advocating for women's leadership in ecological movements. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21) provides quantitative evidence of women's engagement in agriculture and natural resource management, reinforcing their critical role in rural economies.

Moreover, the Forest Rights Act (2006) recognizes the rights of indigenous communities over forest lands, marking a policy shift toward participatory environmental governance, though implementation remains uneven. National-level research also critiques the marginalization of indigenous knowledge in mainstream conservation programs and calls for integrating ecofeminist perspectives to promote social equity and ecological sustainability (Menon & Ramachandra, 2021).

International-Level Studies

Globally, ecofeminism and indigenous wisdom have been studied extensively for their contributions to environmental ethics and sustainable development. Scholars like Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993) frame ecofeminism as a critique of global capitalist patriarchy and highlight indigenous women's knowledge as vital for protecting the commons. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007) emphasizes indigenous communities' rights to maintain their cultural and environmental heritage.

International case studies from regions like Latin America and Africa reveal parallels with India, where indigenous women play essential roles in biodiversity conservation and climate adaptation (Escobar, 2018; Roe et al., 2019). The concept of the commons, deeply rooted in indigenous epistemologies, is recognized globally as a sustainable alternative to privatization and resource exploitation.

Research Gap

Studies at the state level have shown the significant role of indigenous women in natural resource management. For example, in Kerala, tribal women are involved in sustainable forest resource use, focusing on medicinal plants and biodiversity conservation. In Rajasthan, traditional water conservation systems, like Johads, are managed by women's collectives, reviving drought-prone areas through community-based stewardship. In Northeast states like Nagaland and Mizoram, indigenous communities maintain agroforestry practices, integrating cultural rituals and ecological preservation, with women playing a central role in seed saving and sustainable farming.

Objectives

- Document indigenous environmental practices and cultural values in selected Indian communities.
- Analyze role of indigenous women in sustainable resource management.
- Assess socio-political factors' impact on indigenous women's environmental decision-making.
- Explore policy gaps and recommend strategies for integrating ecofeminist and indigenous perspectives.

Hypotheses:

- Indigenous women's unique ecological knowledge contributes to sustainable resource management.
- Marginalization of indigenous women in environmental governance reduces conservation effectiveness.
- Integrating ecofeminist principles with indigenous wisdom can lead to equitable and sustainable environmental policies.

Research methodology

This study will use a mixed-methods approach to explore the roles of indigenous women and ecofeminist perspectives in environmental management.

The research will be conducted in selected indigenous communities across India, including Rajasthan, Kerala, and Northeast India, known for their strong traditional ecological practices. A purposive sampling technique will be used to select around 150 participants involved in natural resource management. Data collection methods include structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and field visits to document environmental practices such as water conservation, forest management, and agricultural activities. Surveys and questionnaires will be conducted once during the study period, followed by multiple rounds of interviews and FGDs to deepen understanding and validate findings. Observations will be carried out throughout the fieldwork phase to complement and triangulate data.

Quantitative data analysis will be conducted using descriptive statistics to summarize participation patterns and demographic information, while qualitative data analysis will be done using content analysis to identify key themes related to ecofeminism, indigenous wisdom, and challenges faced by women. Data from surveys, interviews, FGDs, and observations will be triangulated to ensure validity and provide a holistic understanding of the research questions.

| Question 1–5: Indigenous Environmental Practices | | | | | |
|---|---|---------|--------|-------|---|
| Question | Description | Yes (n) | No (n) | % Yes | Interpretation |
| Q1 | Do you participate in protecting sacred groves? | 110 | 40 | 73.3% | Majority protect sacred groves, showing cultural care for nature. |
| Q2 | Do you engage in traditional water harvesting? | 95 | 55 | 63.3% | Many women involved in water conservation activities. |
| Q3 | Do you practice seed saving for farming? | 105 | 45 | 70% | High involvement in preserving agricultural biodiversity. |
| Q4 | Do you use indigenous methods for soil fertility? | 90 | 60 | 60% | Majority maintain traditional sustainable farming techniques. |
| Q5 | Are ecological rituals part of your daily life? | 85 | 65 | 56.7% | Over half integrate spiritual care with ecological practice. |

| Question 6–10: Role in Natural Resource Management | | | | | | |
|--|---|-----------|------------|---------------------|----------------|--|
| Question | Description | Daily (n) | Weekly (n) | Monthly or less (n) | % Daily+Weekly | Interpretation |
| Q6 | How often do you collect forest products? | 60 | 45 | 45 | 70% | Majority regularly engaged in resource collection. |
| Q7 | How often do you manage community water sources? | 50 | 40 | 60 | 60% | Significant involvement in water management. |
| Q8 | How often do you participate in farming? | 65 | 35 | 50 | 66.7% | Farming is a key activity for most women. |
| Q9 | Do you participate in decision-making about resource use? | 30 | 20 | 100 | 33.3% | Low participation in formal decision-making. |
| Q10 | Are you a member of any environmental community group? | 45 | 25 | 80 | 46.7% | Less than half involved in organized groups. |

| Question 11–15: Socio-Political Challenges & Perspectives on Integration | | | | | |
|--|---|---------|--------|-------|--|
| Question | Description | Yes (n) | No (n) | % Yes | Interpretation |
| Q11 | Do you face gender discrimination in decision-making? | 60 | 90 | 40% | Significant portion experiences gender bias. |
| Q12 | Does lack of education limit your participation? | 45 | 105 | 30% | Education is a key barrier for some women. |

| | | | | | |
|-----|--|-----|-----|-------|---|
| Q13 | Have you been affected by displacement or land loss? | 35 | 115 | 23.3% | Some communities impacted by development pressures. |
| Q14 | Would you support policies integrating ecofeminist and indigenous knowledge? | 105 | 45 | 70% | Strong willingness to engage in inclusive governance. |
| Q15 | Do you believe empowering women will improve environmental care? | 120 | 30 | 80% | Majority see empowerment as key to sustainability. |

Summary and Interpretation

- **Indigenous Practices:** Around 60–73% of participants actively engage in ecological practices (Q1–Q5), affirming the presence of rich indigenous wisdom.
- **Role in Resource Management:** About 60–70% participate regularly in managing natural resources, but only 33.3% have decision-making roles (Q6–Q10), highlighting a gap between practice and power.
- **Socio-Political Challenges:** 40% report gender discrimination; 30% face educational barriers; 23.3% have experienced displacement (Q11–Q13). These challenges constrain women's full participation.
- **Integration & Empowerment:** 70–80% support integrating ecofeminist approaches and believe women's empowerment enhances environmental care (Q14–Q15).

Linking to Objectives & Hypotheses

| Objective / Hypothesis | Supported by Data |
|---|---|
| Indigenous ecological knowledge is widespread. | Yes — 60-73% participation in eco-practices. |
| Indigenous women are central to resource management. | Yes — 60-70% regular participation. |
| Women are marginalized in formal decision-making. | Yes — only 33.3% participate in decision-making. |
| Socio-political barriers limit participation. | Yes — gender discrimination (40%), education (30%). |
| Integration of ecofeminism and indigenous wisdom helps. | Yes — 70-80% support policies and empowerment. |

Overview

The study collected data from 150 indigenous women to understand their participation in environmental practices, socio-political challenges, and perspectives on integrating ecofeminism and indigenous wisdom.

Formula for Frequency and Percentage

- **Frequency (f):** Number of respondents selecting a particular option (e.g., Yes, Daily).
- **Percentage (%)** calculated as:

$$\text{Percentage} = \left(\frac{f}{n} \right) \times 100$$

where $n = 150$ (total respondents).

| Question/ Aspect | Frequency (f) | Total Respondents (n) | Percentage (%) | Interpretation |
|---|---------------|-----------------------|--|---|
| Q1: Participate in sacred grove protection | 110 | 150 | $\frac{110}{150} \times 100 = 73.3\%$ $\frac{110}{150} \times 100 = 73.3\%$ | Majority protect sacred groves, showing cultural care. |
| Q2: Engage in traditional water harvesting | 95 | 150 | 63.3% | Many involved in water conservation. |
| Q3: Practice seed saving for farming | 105 | 150 | 70% | High involvement in preserving agricultural biodiversity. |
| Q4: Use indigenous methods for soil fertility | 90 | 150 | 60% | Maintain traditional farming techniques. |
| Q5: Ecological rituals part of daily life | 85 | 150 | 56.7% | Spiritual care integrated with ecological practice. |
| Q6: Daily participation in collecting forest products | 60 | 150 | 40% | Significant daily engagement in resource collection. |

| | | | | |
|--|-----|-----|-------|---|
| Q7: Weekly participation in managing community water | 40 | 150 | 26.7% | Moderate involvement in water management. |
| Q8: Daily participation in farming | 65 | 150 | 43.3% | Farming is key activity for many women. |
| Q9: Participation in decision-making about resource use | 30 | 150 | 20% | Low participation in formal decision-making. |
| Q10: Member of environmental community group | 45 | 150 | 30% | Less than half involved in organized groups. |
| Q11: Face gender discrimination in decision-making | 60 | 150 | 40% | Significant gender bias reported. |
| Q12: Lack of education limits participation | 45 | 150 | 30% | Education is a barrier for many women. |
| Q13: Affected by displacement or land loss | 35 | 150 | 23.3% | Some communities impacted by development pressures. |
| Q14: Support policies integrating ecofeminist & indigenous knowledge | 105 | 150 | 70% | Strong support for inclusive governance. |
| Q15: Believe empowering women improves environmental care | 120 | 150 | 80% | Majority see empowerment as key to sustainability. |

Result

Indigenous Women's Environmental Participation

- Majority (73.3%) actively protect sacred groves.
- 60–70% engage in traditional environmental practices.
- Only 33% participate in formal environmental decision-making.
- Socio-political challenges: gender discrimination (40%), lack of education (30%).
- Community support: 70–80% for integrating ecofeminist principles with indigenous knowledge.

Recommendations for Indigenous Women in Environmental Governance

- Empower Indigenous Women in Decision-Making: Create inclusive platforms for women's voices in environmental governance.
- Promote Education and Capacity Building: Develop educational programs for indigenous women.
- Protect and Revitalize Indigenous Ecological Practices: Support cultural traditions and community-led resource management.
- Integrate Ecofeminist Perspectives in Policy: Recognize interconnectedness of gender equity, environmental care, and indigenous knowledge systems.

Conclusion

This study underscores the pivotal role indigenous women play in conserving natural resources through their traditional knowledge and cultural practices. Despite facing significant socio-political barriers, these women are central to sustainable environmental management. Integrating ecofeminist frameworks with indigenous wisdom not only promotes ecological stewardship but also fosters gender equity and social justice. Therefore, empowering indigenous women and respecting their knowledge systems is essential for creating inclusive and effective environmental governance in India.

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Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

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