

# Gandhian Environmentalism and Women: Alternatives to India's Ecological Crisis

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## Abstract

*"The Earth has enough resources for our need but not for our greed."*

**-Mahatma Gandhi**

India is confronted with an escalating ecological crisis characterized by forest depletion, water scarcity, pollution, and global warming, largely the result of unsustainable consumerist and development models. In this respect, Gandhian environmental philosophy based on non-violence (Ahimsa), self-sufficiency (Swaraj), simplicity, and trusteeship presents a compelling ethical and viable alternative. Although Mahatma Gandhi is commonly recognized as having an ecological vision, women's roles particularly Gandhian women activists and grassroots eco-leaders are less well represented in mainstream discourses. This article examines the ways in which women have lived and taken Gandhian environmental ideals forward through movements like Chipko, Narmada Bachao Andolan, and Navdanya. It analyzes the intersection of Gandhian values and ecofeminism, pointing out how women's lived experience, communal politics, and nonviolent resistance lead towards sustainable ecological alternatives. By placing women at the center of Gandhian environmentalism, this research presents a gendered perspective to reimagine India's environmental future one based on justice, care, and sustainability.

**Keywords:** Gandhian Environmentalism, Women Environmentalists, Ecofeminism, India, Nonviolence, Sustainability, Environmental Justice, Grassroots Movements, Swaraj, Trusteeship

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## I. Introduction

India today is grappling with a deepening environmental crisis. From polluted rivers and shrinking forests to the rising threat of climate change, the country's ecological balance is being steadily undermined by aggressive industrialization, consumerism, and unsustainable development. While policies and laws exist, they often fall short of addressing the root causes or offering long-term, people-centered solutions.

In such a context, Mahatma Gandhi's ecological thought remains profoundly relevant. His principles Ahimsa (nonviolence), Swaraj (self-rule), Trusteeship, and a life of simplicity challenge the very foundations of the exploitative modern lifestyle. Gandhi did not view nature as a resource to be consumed but as a sacred system to live in harmony with. His emphasis on rural self-sufficiency, ethical consumption, and moral responsibility offers an alternative vision one that prioritizes sustainability and justice.

Crucially, many women have embodied and advanced this vision through grassroots environmental movements. Yet their role in shaping India's ecological landscape often goes unrecognized. From the tree-hugging protests of the Chipko Movement to the seed sovereignty campaigns of Navdanya, women have consistently drawn upon Gandhian values to lead powerful, nonviolent resistance against ecological destruction.

This article explores the intersection of Gandhian environmental philosophy and the leadership of women in India's ecological movements. It argues that a gendered reading of Gandhian thought not only brings historical clarity but also opens pathways for more inclusive and sustainable environmental futures ones built on care, community, and ethical action.

## Environmental Challenges in Contemporary India

India is now confronted with an intensifying ecological crisis characterized by environmental degradation, unsustainable growth, and growing exposure to climate change. India's economic development in recent decades has been achieved at the expense of serious ecological consequences. Deforestation, pollution, loss of biodiversity, and overuse of groundwater are on the rise, endangering human and non-human living systems.

### **Air Pollution**

India remains one of the most polluted nations in the world, with 21 of the world's 30 most polluted cities being in India, according to the 2024 World Air Quality Report by IQAir. The PM2.5 concentration in Delhi, Ghaziabad, and Lucknow continues to be much higher than WHO safety standards, causing more than 2 million premature deaths every year (IQAir, 2024).

"Delhi's average PM2.5 concentration in 2023 was 92.7 µg/m<sup>3</sup>—15 times higher than WHO's annual guideline" (IQAir, 2024).

### **Water Pollution and Scarcity**

India suffers from a dual water crisis—pollution and overuse. According to NITI Aayog's Composite Water Management Index (2023), nearly 600 million Indians face high to extreme water stress. Over 70% of surface water is polluted, largely due to untreated sewage, industrial discharge, and agricultural runoff.

The Ganga River, for instance, gets almost 2,900 million litres daily of untreated sewage, even after the launch of the Namami Gange Mission (CPCB, 2023).

### **Waste Management Crisis**

India produces about 277 million tonnes of municipal solid waste every year, and this is estimated to increase to 388 million tonnes in 2030, according to a Centre for Science and Environment (CSE, 2024) report. More than half of urban areas have poor recycling facilities. India is also the third-largest manufacturer of electronic waste and produces more

2 million tonnes per annum, of which more than 90% is processed by the informal sector through non-regulated procedures (CSE, 2024).

Climate Change and Natural Disasters India has seen intensifying monsoons, heatwaves, and glacial melting, directly attributed to climate change. According to the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD), 2023 recorded the highest number of extreme weather events in the last two decades, resulting in over 3,000 deaths.

"Himalayan glaciers are retreating faster, threatening water security for over 500 million people," says a 2024 report by the Indian Institute of Science (IISc).

### **Biodiversity Loss and Deforestation**

Urban development, mining, and farming have contributed to severe habitat fragmentation. India lost almost 668,000 hectares of cover forests from 2015–2023 (FSI, 2023). The Western Ghats and the Northeastern forests are the worst-affected regions.

The Times of India in July 2025 had reported that Indore's Yashwant Sagar wetland—a Ramsar wetland—lost 68% of its sarus crane population as a result of non-regulated tourism and water pollution (TOI, July 2025).

### **Policy Delays and Regulatory Rollbacks**

India's environmental policies have been criticized to be diluting the protections. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) relaxed sulphur emission norms for 79% of coal power plants on July 12, 2025, by eliminating compulsory flue-gas desulphurisation standards.

The step will increase SO<sub>2</sub> emissions by a large extent, already being among the largest in the world, diluting the nation's National Clean Air Programme

"Reversing pollution mandates undermines India's Paris climate targets," stated Sunita Narain, Director, CSE (Reuters, 2025).

### **Urban Flooding and Water Infrastructure**

Large cities such as Surat are enacting creek structure reviews to mitigate flooding. Surat Municipal Corporation instructed a 10-day study of all natural waterway obstructions in July 2025 to avert monsoon-related urban flooding (TOI, July 2025).

In Delhi, the Union Home Ministry discussed Yamuna rejuvenation work, urging accelerated development of sewage treatment plants and solid waste clearance schemes (ET, July 2025).

### **Women and Ecology: Intersections in the Indian Context**

#### **Jal Sahelis: Women Water-Warriors of Bundelkhand**

The Jal Sahelis, primarily from drought-prone Bundelkhand, are local women who drive grassroots water conservation efforts—repairing handpumps, desilting ponds, building check dams, and managing village water institutions (Srivastava, 2022; Scroll India, 2020). In Tikamgarh district, around 735 women from 150 villages revived traditional water systems and established kitchen gardening Evaluations by Welthungerhilfe and Parmarth show over 500 Jal Sahelis across seven districts, significantly improving groundwater recharge and sanitation (The Better India, 2017; Countercurrents, 2025).

#### **Basanti Devi ("Save Kosi" Movement)**

Basanti Devi from Uttarakhand mobilized hundreds of women from roughly 200 villages starting in 2003 to rejuvenate the Kosi River basin's springs and forests. Within two decades, previously dry springs were restored, forests regenerated, and agriculture resumed, thanks to reforestation and banning fresh wood collection. Her commitment earned her the Nari Shakti Puraskar (2016) and Padma Shri (2022) (The Better India, 2022; PTI–ThePrint, 2025).

### **Empirical Impact & Empowerment**

Research confirms that when women lead watershed programs, those communities show stronger sustainability and equitable resource management (Srivastava, 2022). The Pani Panchayats created by the Jal Sahelis grant formal decision-making power to women at village levels (India Water Portal, 2021). These initiatives not only address ecological issues but also challenge gender norms, as women overcome patriarchal barriers to influence policy and public welfare (Countercurrents, 2025; India Water Portal, 2021).

### **Gandhian Alternatives to Ecological Crisis**

Gandhi insisted on "aparigraha" self-limiting non-possession and low personal wants as the key to ecological balance. Gandhi believed that genuine prosperity entails restricting desires in order to guarantee collective well-being: "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need but not any man's greed" (Verma et al., 2023, p. 2). This aphorism directly applies to contemporary sustainable development values, calling for ethical moderation in consumption (Mahatma Gandhi, 1925; Singh, 2021; Verma et al., 2023).

### **Trusteeship & Sarvodaya for Ecological Equity**

Gandhi's doctrine of trusteeship holds that wealth and resources belong to the community, not individuals. Every person acts as a "trustee" of nature and communal wealth (MKGandhi.org, n.d.; Singh, 2021). This collectivist responsibility serves as an ethical foundation for environmental governance (Nadkarni, 2015).

### **Village-Centered Development & Decentralization**

He advocated "Gram Swaraj" (village self-rule) using decentralized, small-scale technologies. Development on livelihoods and basic needs, avoiding environmental destruction caused by large-scale industrialization (MKGandhi.org, n.d.; Singh, 2021). Such an idea guides contemporary sustainable village economies and eco-technology programs.

### **Nonviolent Coexistence – Ahimsa as Environmental Ethic**

Gandhi's ethic of non-violence extends to all life — animals, plants, ecosystems — fostering an ecological ethic of care and respect (Kumar & Shiju, 2022; Singh, 2021). He criticized industrialization that harms of nature, foreseeing today's biodiversity and climate crises (MKGandhi.org, n.d.; Down To Earth, 2017).

### **Reimagining Ecological Futures through a Gandhian-Feminist Lens**

### **Ecofeminism and Climate-Biodiversity Nexus**

Ecofeminism focuses on the intertwinement of ecological destruction and gender oppression. Indian women, particularly tribal and rural women, experience the weight of biodiversity loss as well as climate effects, but are also key agents of resilience and adaptive practices. Incorporating their ecological wisdom into policy planning can enhance both environmental and social justice (Mahamuni, 2024).

### **Gandhian Ethics in Feminist Agroecology**

At the 2025 Mahila Kisan Sammelan, feminist agroecology was highlighted as a path forward—integrating Gandhi's principles with women-led climate-resilient farming practices. Attendees emphasized decentralized, community-led agroecology rooted in local knowledge and gender equity (Undisciplined Environments, 2025).

### **Reviving Gandhian Values Through Women-Led Land Stewardship**

Ecofeminist scholars argue that Gandhian ethics—like nonviolence, trusteeship, and self-reliance—gain modern relevance when applied through women-led environmental initiatives. Programs such as watershed development by rural women reflect Gandhi's emphasis on Gram Swaraj (village self-rule) and ethical stewardship of nature (Kumar & Shiju, 2022).

## **II. Conclusion**

India is at a tipping point ecologically. The prevailing development paradigms—based on industrial growth, consumerism, and extraction—have thrust the country into an intensifying green crisis. In this situation, Gandhian environmentalism with its moral urgency and focus on nonviolence, simplicity, and self-reliance can be a compelling alternative.

Women from rural, tribal, and marginalized groups have carried these Gandhian values in their practice throughout time—though not always formally recognized. Their everyday actions of water conservation, seed saving, resistance to forest destruction, and operation of local economies demonstrate a profound ecology of care, justice, and community.

As this article has illustrated, a Gandhian-feminist vision not only critiques the ecological and social violence of standard development, but also presents a vision of hope, and action. Eco-Swaraj, seed sovereignty, local economies, and community-led resistance are not abstract ideals—these are lived experiences across much of India.

The future of India's environment hinges not on mass-scale techno-fixes but on adopting grassroots wisdom, ethical politics, and participatory governance. Recovering Gandhi through the leadership and practices

of women environmentalists is one step toward ecological justice—one which is sustainable, fair, and profoundly human.

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