

Women Ecowarriors: Ecology Grassroots Activists against GMO, Deforestation and Pollution

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“When it comes to the sustenance of the economy, women act as experts and providers. Even though women’s work in providing sustenance is the most vital activity, a patriarchal economy treats it as non-work.”

Over the last four decades, I have served the Earth and grassroots ecological movements, beginning with the historic Chipko Movement (Hug the Tree Movement), in the Central Himalaya.

Every movement in which I participated, I noticed that women were the decision-makers — they decided the course of action and even were unrelenting in protecting the land and the sources of their sustenance and livelihoods.

Women who were a part of the Chipko movement were protecting forests because deforestation and logging in Uttarakhand led to floods, draughts, landslides and other such natural disasters. It led to scarcity of fuel and fodder. It led to the disappearance of springs and streams, forcing women to walk longer and further for water.

The dominant paradigm of forestry is based on monocultures of commercial species where forests are seen as timber mines that produce timber and generate revenue and leads to profits. The women of the Chipko Movement taught the world and me that timber, revenue and profits were not the real products of the forest; the real products were soil, water and pure air.

Today, science refers to these as ecological functions of ecosystems. Illiterate women of the Garhwal Himalaya were four decades ahead of the scientists of the world. By 1981, the government was compelled to stop logging in the Central Himalaya.

On April 22, 2002, which is recognised as Earth Day, I was invited by women from a small hamlet named Plachimada in Palghat, Kerala, to join their struggle against Coca Cola which was mining 1.5 million litres of water a day and polluting the water that remained in their wells.

Women were forced to walk 10 kilometres every day in search for clean drinking water. Mylamma, a tribal woman leading the movement, said they would not walk further for water. Coca Cola must stop stealing their water. These women decided to set up a satyagraha (struggle for truth) camp opposite the Coca Cola factory. I too joined them in solidarity and over the years supported them. In 2004, Coca Cola was forced to shut down.

In 1984, a terrible disaster caused by a leak from Union Carbide’s pesticide plant in Bhopal

killed 3,000 people immediately. Still thousands of children are born with disabilities. Union Carbide is now owned by Dow, which refuses to take ownership of responsibility for justice. In 1984, as a response to the Bhopal disaster, I started a campaign, “No more Bhopals, plant a Neem”.

The women of Bhopal were also victims of the disaster. But they did not let their hopes and fight for justice wane. For example, Rashidabi and Champadevi Shukla continued their struggle for justice. They also provide rehabilitation to the children born with disabilities. They have set up a Chingari Trust to honour women fighting corporate injustice. In 2012, they invited me to give the Chingari award to the women fighting against the nuclear power plant at Kudankulam, Tamil Nadu.

In 1994, I came to know that the use of neem to control pests and diseases in agriculture has been patented by US department of agriculture and multinational WR Grace. We launched a neem campaign to challenge the biopiracy. More than 100,000 Indians signed to initiate a case in the European Patent Office. I joined hands with Magda Alvoet, the president of the European Greens and Linda Bullard, president of International Foundation for Organic Agriculture to fight the case for 11 years. On March 8, 2005, on International Women’s Day, the European patent office struck down the biopiracy patent.

Why there’s a trend of women leading ecology movements against deforestation and pollution of water, against toxic and nuclear hazards? I partly believe that in the division of labour, it is women who have been left to look after sustenance — providing food, water, health and care.

When it comes to the sustenance of the economy, women act as both experts and providers. Even though women’s work in providing sustenance is the most vital human activity, a patriarchal economy which defines the economy only as the economy of the marketplace, treats it as non work.

The patriarchal model of the economy is dominated by one figure, the gross domestic product, which is measured on the basis of an artificially created production boundary (if you produce what you consume, you do not produce).

When the ecological crisis created by an ecologically blind economic paradigm leads to the disappearance of forests and water, spread of diseases because of toxics and poisons, and the consequent threat to life and survival, it is women who rise to wake up the society to the crisis, and to defend the Earth and lives. Women are leading the paradigm shift to align the economy with ecology. After all, both are rooted in the word “oikos” — our home.

Not only are women experts in the sustenance economy. They are experts in ecological science through their daily participation in processes that provide sustenance. Their expertise is rooted in lived experience and not in abstract and fragmented knowledge, which cannot see through the connectedness of the web of life.

The rise of masculinist science with Rene Descartes, Isaac Newton, Bacon led to the domination of reductionist mechanistic science and a subjugation of knowledge systems based on interconnections and relationships. This includes all indigenous knowledge systems and women’s knowledge.

The most violent display of mechanistic science is in the promotion of industrial agriculture,

including genetically modified organisms as a solution to hunger and malnutrition. Industrial agriculture uses chemicals developed for warfare as inputs. Genetic engineering is based on the idea of genes as “master molecules” giving unidirectional commands to the rest of the organism. The reality is that living systems are self-organised, interactive and dynamic. The genome is fluid.

As these issues move centre stage in every society, it is women who bring the alternatives through biodiversity and agroecology that offer real solutions to the food and nutrition crisis. As I have learnt over 30 years of building the Navdanya movement, biodiversity produces more than monocultures. Small family farms based on women’s participation provide 75 per cent of the food eaten in the world. Industrial agriculture only produces 25 per cent, while using and destroying 75 per cent of the Earth’s resources.

When it comes to real solutions to real problems faced by the planet and people, it is the subjugated knowledge and invisible work of women based on co-creation and co-production with nature that will show the way to human survival and well being in the future.

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