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Behind the Veil, but Soldier at the Front: Intersectional Ecofeminism in India

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Abstract: ***Ecofeminism can be well understood by this popular quote of Vandana Shiva, "We are either going to have a future where women lead the way to make peace with the Earth or we are not going to have a human future at all". This paper explores the concept of intersectional ecofeminism in India, examining the interplay of gender, caste, class, and environmental issues within the socio-political landscape. It argues that ecofeminism, which links ecological degradation to the oppression of women, must be viewed through an intersectional lens to fully understand the complexities of environmental justice in India. By analysing efforts led by marginalized women, this research highlights the necessity of inclusive approaches that address both ecological sustainability and social equity. This research discusses about the challenges faced by marginalised women and recommendations to face these challenges for beautiful earth.***
Keywords: Environment, Conservation, Women, Movement, Ecofeminism

I. INTRODUCTION

The use of gendered phrases like "Mother Earth" and "Mother Nature," along with the animalistic language frequently used to describe women, underscores the long-standing connection between women and nature. Ecofeminism can be described as a "value system, a social movement, and a practice" that provides a political analysis examining the connections between androcentrism and environmental degradation. It involves an "awareness" that starts with the understanding that the exploitation of nature is closely related to views on women and tribal cultures. The term "Ecofeminism" was introduced in 1974 and expanded upon in the mid-1970s, evolving into a movement by 1980, marked by the first ecofeminist conference titled "Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s." Ecofeminism focuses on the interconnectedness and unity of theory and practice, viewing the destruction of the Earth and its inhabitants by corporate entities, as well as the threat of nuclear destruction posed by military forces, as issues that are fundamentally feminist concerns. It recognizes the link between the exploitation and degradation of the natural environment and the subordination and oppression of women. Ecofeminism values the bond between women and nature by reviving ancient rituals centered on the Mother Goddess, the moon, animals, and the female reproductive system.

The origins of ecofeminism in India can be traced to the Chipko Movement of the 1970s, a grassroots initiative led by women in the Uttarakhand region. This movement sought to protect forests from deforestation by hugging trees, gaining international attention and highlighting women's roles in environmental activism. Additionally, India has a rich tradition of recognizing the interconnectedness of nature and society through its spiritual and cultural practices. The idea of 'Prakriti' (nature) is deeply rooted in Indian philosophy and religions, emphasizing the importance of harmonious coexistence between humans and the environment. However, despite these historical and cultural values, Indian society continues to face challenges related to gender inequality and discriminatory injustices. Discrimination against women remains prevalent in various areas, including limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Furthermore, women, particularly in rural areas, are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation due to their dependence on natural resources for their livelihoods.

Intersectionality examines how various forms of social stratification—such as race, class, and gender—intersect to produce distinct experiences of discrimination and privilege. By applying this framework to ecofeminism, we gain a deeper insight into how different identities influence women's interactions with environmental issues. This idea has influenced ecological movements, leading to the emergence of intersectional ecofeminism and intersectional environmentalism. Consequently, the focus shifted from gender alone to the overlapping aspects of identity that contribute to broader marginalization in society, as well as one's relationship with and access to the environment and natural resources. As a result, intersectional ecofeminism became a more inclusive movement by moving away from the tendency to generalize the category of "women" and recognizing the varied relationships between women and the environment. In essence, ecofeminism has embraced the principles of intersectionality. Intersectional ecofeminism emphasizes the marginalization of both women and nature, focusing on the discrimination and exploitation they face due to sexism, class, homophobia, caste systems, and racism.

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For instance, it highlights the varied experiences of women concerning their environment, comparing the realities of a Dalit or Adivasi woman with those of an urban upper-class woman. By integrating intersectionality into ecofeminism, the movement advocates for the inclusion of women from diverse backgrounds in environmental policymaking, fostering non-discriminatory practices and sustainable development. This approach also recognizes the traditional environmental protection and conservation practices within the indigenous knowledge systems of rural and indigenous women, which should be taken into account during the policymaking process.

II. INTERSECTIONAL ECOFEMINISM IN INDIA

Intersectional ecofeminism in India explores the interconnectedness of gender, class, caste, and environmental issues, recognizing how these factors combine to create unique experiences of marginalization. In India, the concepts of ecofeminism and intersectionality are crucial because gender identity is deeply intertwined with caste and class. This interconnection highlights how women's experiences are shaped not only by their gender but also by their social and economic positions, making it essential to address these overlapping identities in discussions about environmental issues and social justice. This framework emphasizes the need to address both social inequalities and environmental challenges simultaneously. In India, women, particularly from marginalized communities such as Dalits and Adivasis, often bear the brunt of environmental degradation. Their livelihoods depend heavily on natural resources, making them particularly vulnerable to ecological changes and injustices. By highlighting these diverse experiences, intersectional ecofeminism advocates for inclusive policies that consider the voices and needs of all women. Moreover, India's rich spiritual and cultural traditions, which emphasize the harmony between nature and humanity, provide a strong foundation for this movement. Initiatives that incorporate indigenous knowledge and practices are vital in promoting sustainable development while respecting the rights and roles of women. Intersectional ecofeminism in India seeks to create a more equitable and sustainable society by addressing the systemic issues that affect both women and the environment.

Environmental injustices, including the unequal distribution of pollution and access to resources, disproportionately impact marginalized communities such as lower castes, indigenous peoples, and urban slum residents. Advocating for equitable access to environmental benefits and resources can help address these disparities, reduce social inequalities, and promote sustainable development in India. Firstly, women in rural communities in India are particularly impacted by environmental degradation. As primary providers of water, food, and fuel for their families, they heavily depend on natural resources. However, issues like deforestation, land degradation, and water scarcity hinder their ability to fulfil basic needs and sustain their livelihoods, resulting in increased workloads, heightened vulnerability to climate-related disasters, and negative health outcomes. Secondly, the effects of caste system in India are often felt most acutely by marginalized communities, including Dalits (lower caste), Adivasis (indigenous groups), and other minorities. These communities frequently face environmental pollution, displacement due to large-scale development projects, and the loss of traditional means of subsistence. Discrimination against these groups further intensifies their susceptibility to environmental harm. Ecofeminism in India emphasizes the need to address these interconnected issues, advocating for gender and social justice within the environmental movement. It calls for challenging patriarchal power structures that exploit both women and nature, while ensuring the inclusion and leadership of marginalized communities in decision-making processes.

Vandana Shiva is often regarded as a key figure in Indian ecofeminism, alongside activists like Medha Patkar, Sugathakumari, Nandini Sahu, and Arundhati Roy, who contribute significantly to the movement. While their contributions are vital, it's essential to recognize that rural women in India have also been pivotal in advancing the cause, often without formal awareness of the movement. One of its earliest expressions of intersectional ecofeminism can be traced back to April 1973 in Mandal, Uttar Pradesh, during the Chipko Movement, a peaceful conservation initiative where women hugged trees to prevent them from being cut down by contractors supported by the government. This form of protest spread to other regions in India and across the globe, influencing movements like the Jungle Bachao Andolan in Bihar and Jharkhand, the Appiko Chaluvali in Karnataka, and similar protests in countries like Switzerland and the Philippines. Although Sunder Lal Bahuguna, an environmental activist, led the Chipko movement, its history highlights connections between feminism, intersectionality, and ecological justice. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1992) introduced the idea of "inclusive environmentalism," arguing that the deprivation of forest resources for indigenous peoples stemmed from both colonial forest policies and the attitudes of upper-caste Hindus (Kumar & Mishra 2022). In this context, intersectional ecofeminism addresses the intertwined issues of colonialism, caste discrimination, and patriarchy in the distribution and consumption of natural resources. Baby Kamble, Daya Pawar, Urmila Pawar and Bama are some of the prominent Dalit writers who write on ecofeminist themes. Their narratives attempt to dismantle the notion of “eco-casteism” which is “an ecological determinant of caste, (that) provides a rationalization and justification of caste system through nature” (Sharma, 2018).

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Rev. Dr. George Matthew Nalunnakkal (2003) suggests that the Adivasi movement in Kerala, led by C. K. Janu, offers a potential alternative to traditional ecofeminism, which he terms "organic womanism." Janu's leadership in the Adivasi protests against the Kerala State Government involved occupying the Muthanga forests within the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, responding to the government's failure to fulfil an agreement to allocate five acres of land to each Adivasi family in exchange for the land taken for the Sanctuary.

III. WOMEN FROM MARGINALIZED SECTIONS FIGHTING FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

A 2016 United Nations report states that environmental defenders are frequently ordinary individuals residing in remote villages, forests, or mountains. Often, they are indigenous leaders or community members who protect their ancestral lands from the adverse effects of large-scale projects like mining and dams. The report emphasizes that these defenders are vital in promoting sustainable, inclusive, and equitable development that benefits everyone without harming the environment.

The Pondi village in Central India is one of the examples for gendered resource politics, as women actively fought for their rights to the forest commons that are essential to their daily lives and livelihood challenges. This ultimately resulted in a collective push for the Baiga women's movement in response to the illegal practices of the Forest Department in the Baiga Chak region of Central India.

In Madhya Pradesh's Panna Tiger Reserve, the Gond Adivasi community of Umravan village is in a precarious position. Displaced under the guise of wildlife conservation, they are fighting to preserve their traditional way of life. In response, a group of determined women has taken the initiative to create kitchen gardens equipped with a solar-powered watering system. These gardens not only enhance food security for the community and support individuals affected by TB and silicosis, but they also serve as a sustainable, gender-equitable solution to climate challenges.

The Bishnoi community, established in 1485 by Guru Jambheśvara, has been dedicated to environmental conservation for over 500 years, staunchly protecting trees and wildlife based on their core principles. In 1730, in the small village of Khejarli near Jodhpur, soldiers led by Minister Girdharidas Bhandari arrived with orders to cut down the village's khejari trees to provide wood for a royal construction project. When the soldiers began to cut the first tree, a woman named Amrita Devi rushed forward. As a Bishnoi, she viewed the destruction of these trees as not just a violation of her community's sacred beliefs but also a personal affront to her way of life. Tragically, Amrita Devi and her daughters were killed in front of the village as they tried to protect the trees. Undeterred, the Bishnois embraced the trees, and one by one, they were slaughtered. By the end of the massacre, 363 Bishnois had sacrificed their lives for the khejari trees. In response, the king eventually ordered measures to prevent deforestation in the area. In 1570, two Bishnoi women, Kheevani and Netu Naina, were killed while bravely defending khejari trees from a local strongman named Gopaldas. Later, in 1604, Karma and Gaura were martyred in Revasadi village for the same noble cause. A particularly heartwarming aspect of Bishnoi culture is the vital role women play in nurturing wildlife. In their desert villages, Bishnoi women often take in orphaned or injured fawns, caring for them as if they were their own children, even breastfeeding them. This deep commitment to both the environment and animal welfare underscores the Bishnoi community's unique relationship with nature and their unwavering dedication to conservation.

The Dongria Kondh, an indigenous tribe from the Niyamgiri hills in Odisha, India, have become emblematic of environmental activism, particularly through their resistance to mining activities that threaten their ancestral lands. Their connection to the Niyamgiri hills is deeply rooted in their culture and spirituality; the mountains are considered sacred, and the forests are vital for their livelihoods and identity. Central to this movement are the women of the Dongria Kondh, who have emerged as powerful leaders in the fight for their rights and the environment. These women mobilize communities, lead protests, and advocate for sustainable practices, drawing on traditional ecological knowledge that emphasizes harmony with nature. Their involvement has not only highlighted the importance of women's roles in environmental activism but also reinforced cultural pride and unity within the tribe. The Dongria Kondh's opposition to mining, particularly the proposed bauxite mining by Vedanta Resources, has brought national and international attention to their plight.

The Santhal community, one of the largest indigenous groups in India, primarily resides in the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha. Santhal women have been significant participants in environmental movements, advocating for their rights, land, and natural resources while highlighting the intersection of gender and ecological issues. Santhal women's activism is rooted in their deep connection to the land and natural resources, which are integral to their culture and livelihood. As custodians of traditional knowledge about sustainable agricultural practices and forest management, these women play a crucial role in preserving biodiversity and ecosystems.

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Their activism has highlighted the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on women, who often bear the brunt of these changes due to their roles in agriculture and household management. By raising awareness about these challenges, they emphasize the need for sustainable development that respects indigenous rights and protects the environment. Through their efforts, Santhal women are not only advocating for immediate environmental concerns but also seeking to empower their communities. They emphasize the importance of education, skill development, and leadership training for women, fostering a new generation of activists who can continue the fight for their rights and the environment.

Bhil women, part of one of India's prominent tribal communities primarily found in the western states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Gujarat, have been crucial in movements aimed at environmental conservation. For Bhil women, the environment is not just a backdrop for their lives; it is integral to their culture, spirituality, and livelihoods. They rely on forests for food, medicine, and materials, making them key custodians of biodiversity. This intimate knowledge of their surroundings equips them to advocate for sustainable practices that have been passed down through generations. In recent years, Bhil women activism highlights the interconnectedness of environmental issues and gender, as women are often the first to feel the consequences of ecological harm. One notable example is their involvement in the fight against mining projects, which not only jeopardize their land but also disrupt local ecosystems.

IV. CHALLENGES BEFORE INTERSECTIONAL ECOFEMINISM IN INDIA

While both ecofeminism and intersectional injustices are relevant and applicable in the Indian context, their implementation faces significant challenges. The patriarchal social structure and entrenched gender inequalities can impede progress toward the goals of ecofeminism. Likewise, corruption, bureaucratic obstacles, and political influence can undermine efforts to achieve environmental justice. Intersectional ecofeminism in India grapples with a range of complex challenges. At the core is the pervasive influence of cultural patriarchy, which often sidelines women's voices in environmental decision-making. This is particularly pronounced in rural areas where many women depend on natural resources for their livelihoods. Economic inequalities further compound this issue, limiting access to resources and participation in discussions about environmental policies. Moreover, environmental degradation—from pollution to climate change—disproportionately affects marginalized communities, revealing the urgent need to link gender and environmental issues. The caste system adds another layer of complexity, with lower-caste women facing multiple forms of discrimination that hinder their struggles for both rights and resources.

Awareness of ecofeminism and its intersectionality remains limited, which can impede collective action. Many individuals may not fully grasp how gender and environmental concerns intersect, leading to fragmented efforts. Additionally, existing policies often fail to address these intersections adequately, leaving the specific needs of marginalized women overlooked. Resistance to change is a significant barrier, as traditional norms and entrenched power structures can obstruct progress. Rapid urbanization and displacement further exacerbate vulnerabilities, especially for those who are already marginalized. The challenges are intensified for women activists, who may face harassment, violence, or legal repercussions for their work, discouraging engagement in ecofeminist movements. Climate change poses a severe threat to India, with vulnerable populations—especially women in rural areas—facing its harshest impacts. Deforestation, water scarcity, and agricultural disruptions disproportionately affect women who rely on these resources for their livelihoods.

Emerging grassroots movements, such as those led by the Women's Collective in Tamil Nadu, are working at the intersection of gender and environmental justice. These organizations advocate for sustainable farming practices and the rights of women to access land and resources, showcasing the potential of intersectional ecofeminism to address both ecological and social challenges. Addressing these intertwined challenges requires a comprehensive approach that acknowledges and integrates the diverse experiences of women across various social, economic, and environmental contexts, fostering a more inclusive dialogue around ecofeminism in India.

V. WAY FORWARD

Intersectional ecofeminism in India addresses the interconnected issues of gender inequality, environmental degradation, and social justice through a multifaceted approach. One essential solution is empowering women through education, particularly in rural areas, where programs can emphasize the links between gender, environment, and sustainability. By enhancing women's knowledge, we can promote their active participation in environmental stewardship. Community-based resource management is another vital strategy. Involving women in decision-making processes concerning natural resources ensures that their needs and perspectives shape sustainable practices, ultimately benefiting both the environment and their livelihoods. Legal reforms are also crucial; advocating for laws that protect the environment while ensuring gender equity can create a more just framework for resource management.

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Supporting sustainable agricultural practices can further enhance women's roles in food security and biodiversity conservation. Initiatives that provide access to green technologies and financial resources will empower women farmers to adopt methods like organic farming and water-efficient practices. Building networks among women's organizations, environmental groups, and grassroots movements fosters collaboration and knowledge sharing. This collective action can amplify voices advocating for change. Additionally, cultural awareness campaigns can challenge patriarchal norms and highlight the significance of women's contributions to environmental conservation. Research and documentation play a critical role in this movement, as gathering data on the impacts of environmental degradation on women can inform policy and advocacy efforts. It's also essential to adopt intersectional approaches that recognize the diverse challenges faced by women from marginalized castes, tribes, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Finally, promoting participatory governance ensures that women's voices are integral to environmental policy-making at all levels. By weaving together these solutions, intersectional ecofeminism can pave the way for a more equitable and sustainable future in India, benefiting both communities and the environment.

VI. CONCLUSION

Intersectional ecofeminism provides a vital framework for understanding and addressing the intertwined issues of gender, caste, class, and environmental degradation in India. As a movement that recognizes the profound links between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature, intersectional ecofeminism provides a vital framework for understanding the unique experiences of marginalized women, particularly those from indigenous and lower-caste communities. The historical context of ecofeminism in India, exemplified by movements like Chipko and the enduring legacies of figures such as Vandana Shiva, illustrates the critical role women have played in environmental activism.

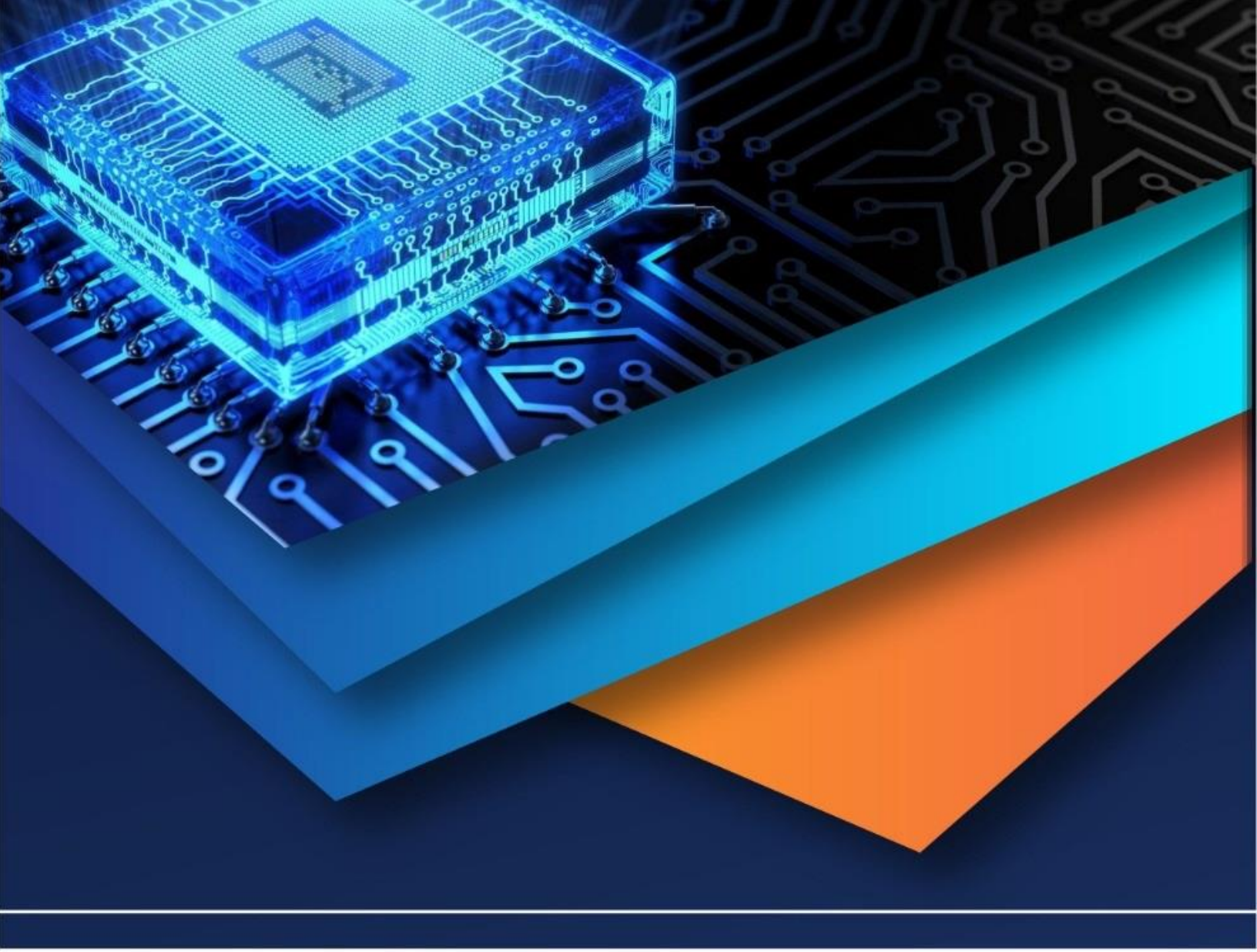
Despite the formidable challenges posed by patriarchal structures, economic inequalities, and systemic discrimination, the resilience of women in these movements showcases their unwavering commitment to both social justice and ecological sustainability. The active involvement of women from diverse backgrounds, such as the Dongria Kondh, Santhal, Gond, and Bhil communities, emphasizes the necessity of inclusive dialogue and policymaking that respects their traditional ecological knowledge and rights. The intersectional approach calls for an urgent rethinking of strategies aimed at promoting environmental justice. Empowering women through education, enhancing their roles in community-based resource management, and advocating for legal reforms are essential steps toward achieving equity. Furthermore, grassroots movements that advocate for sustainable practices demonstrate the potential for collective action to address both ecological and social challenges.

As India faces escalating environmental crises, it is imperative that the voices of marginalized women are amplified and integrated into decision-making processes. By weaving together the principles of intersectionality and ecofeminism, a more just and sustainable future can be envisioned—one that honors the interconnectedness of all beings and recognizes the invaluable contributions of women to environmental stewardship. In this quest for equity, the movement for intersectional ecofeminism not only seeks to uplift women but also to ensure the health of our planet for generations to come.

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