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Ecofeminist Perspectives on Environmental Sustainability in Northeast India: Reclaiming the Ecological Agency of Rural Women

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Abstract

Ecofeminism has emerged as a significant interdisciplinary framework that explores the interconnected relationship between gender, ecology, and sustainable development. It challenges patriarchal systems that simultaneously marginalize women and exploit nature, emphasizing the need for environmental justice and social equity. In Northeast India, where rural livelihoods are deeply dependent on forests, agriculture, water resources, and biodiversity, ecofeminist perspectives offer valuable insights into the role of women in environmental sustainability. Rural women in the region possess extensive indigenous ecological knowledge and actively contribute to resource management, biodiversity conservation, food security, and community resilience. This review paper examines the theoretical foundations of ecofeminism and explores its relevance to the socio-ecological realities of Northeast India. Drawing on secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, policy documents, and research reports, the paper analyzes the ecological agency of rural women and their contribution to sustainable development. The study further investigates the challenges posed by environmental degradation, climate change, deforestation, and socio-economic inequalities, which disproportionately affect women. The findings reveal that rural women function not merely as resource users but as environmental custodians and knowledge holders whose traditional practices support ecological sustainability. However, their contributions often remain underrepresented in formal environmental governance and development policies. The paper argues that integrating women's knowledge systems and ensuring their participation in environmental decision-making are essential for achieving sustainable development in Northeast India. Ecofeminist approaches thus provide an important framework for promoting inclusive, equitable, and environmentally sustainable futures in the region.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Rural Women, Environmental Sustainability, Northeast India, Indigenous Knowledge, Environmental Governance.

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed increasing concerns regarding environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, climate change, and unsustainable patterns of development. These challenges have generated renewed interest in alternative approaches to sustainability that recognize the interdependence between human societies and natural ecosystems. Among such approaches, ecofeminism has emerged as a powerful theoretical and political framework linking environmental concerns with gender justice.

Ecofeminism argues that the domination of women and the exploitation of nature originate from similar patriarchal structures that privilege control, hierarchy, and economic exploitation. Since its emergence in the 1970s, ecofeminism has evolved into a diverse field encompassing philosophical, social, political, and environmental perspectives. Scholars such as Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Karen Warren, and Bina Agarwal have emphasized that environmental sustainability cannot be achieved without addressing gender inequality and recognizing women's contributions to ecological conservation.

Northeast India represents a particularly significant region for ecofeminist inquiry. The region is characterized by diverse ecological landscapes, extensive forest cover, rich biodiversity, and numerous indigenous communities whose livelihoods depend directly upon natural resources. Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and collection of non-timber forest products remain central to rural livelihoods. Within these socio-ecological systems, women play crucial roles in resource management, food production, water collection, seed preservation, and biodiversity conservation.

Despite their significant contributions, rural women often remain marginalized in environmental governance and policy-making processes. Their ecological knowledge and environmental practices frequently receive limited recognition within formal development frameworks. At the

same time, environmental degradation, climate change, and development-induced transformations disproportionately affect rural women because of their close dependence on natural resources.

This paper examines ecofeminist perspectives on environmental sustainability in Northeast India by focusing on the ecological agency of rural women. It seeks to understand how women contribute to sustainability through indigenous knowledge systems and environmental practices while exploring the challenges they face in contemporary development contexts.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To critically examine the theoretical foundations of ecofeminism and its relevance to understanding the relationship between rural women and the environment in Northeast India.
2. To analyze the role of rural women's indigenous ecological knowledge and environmental practices in promoting sustainability and community resilience in Northeast India.
3. To explore the environmental, socio-economic, and policy challenges faced by rural women and assess the potential of ecofeminist approaches for sustainable development and environmental governance.

3. Methodology

The present study is based on a qualitative review of secondary sources. Relevant literature was collected from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports, policy documents, and academic publications related to ecofeminism, environmental sustainability, indigenous knowledge, gender studies, and Northeast India. The collected materials were analyzed thematically according to the objectives of the study. The review approach enables a comprehensive understanding of existing theoretical perspectives and empirical findings concerning rural women and environmental sustainability in Northeast India.

4. Result and Discussion :

Objective 1:

To critically examine Eco feminist Theory and Its Relevance to Rural Women in Northeast India

Ecofeminism emerged as a response to the realization that environmental degradation and gender oppression are interconnected phenomena. The theory challenges dominant development paradigms that view nature as an object to be exploited and women as subordinate actors within social structures. According to ecofeminist scholars, both women and nature have historically been subjected to systems of domination that prioritize economic growth, technological control, and resource extraction.

Karen Warren argues that hierarchical thinking creates dualisms such as man/woman, culture/nature, and reason/emotion, where one category is considered superior to the other. Such dualistic thinking legitimizes both environmental exploitation and gender discrimination. Ecofeminism seeks to dismantle these hierarchies by promoting relationships based on care, reciprocity, and ecological responsibility.

The relevance of ecofeminism becomes particularly evident in Northeast India, where rural communities maintain close relationships with natural ecosystems. Women participate extensively in agricultural activities, forest resource collection, livestock management, and household subsistence practices. Their daily interactions with nature generate a unique understanding of environmental processes and ecological changes.

Unlike many mainstream development approaches, ecofeminism recognizes rural women as active environmental agents rather than passive beneficiaries. Women possess practical ecological knowledge derived from generations of interaction with forests, water systems, agricultural lands, and biodiversity resources. This knowledge contributes significantly to sustainable resource management and environmental conservation.

The theory also helps explain why environmental degradation often affects women more severely than men. When forests are depleted or water sources become scarce, rural women must invest additional time and labour in securing essential resources. Environmental changes therefore directly influence their livelihoods, health, and social well-being.

In Northeast India, ecofeminism additionally intersects with indigenous worldviews that emphasize harmony between humans and nature. Many indigenous communities practice collective resource management and maintain cultural traditions that respect ecological balance. Rural women play crucial roles in preserving these traditions and transmitting environmental knowledge across generations.

Consequently, ecofeminism provides a valuable framework for understanding how environmental sustainability, indigenous knowledge, and gender justice intersect within the socio-ecological realities of Northeast India.

Objective 2:

To analyze the Rural Women's Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Environmental Practices in Promoting Sustainability

Rural women in Northeast India occupy a central position within local environmental systems. Their contributions extend beyond domestic responsibilities and encompass a wide range of ecological practices that support sustainable livelihoods and community resilience. Ecofeminist scholars argue that women's environmental knowledge is not merely experiential but constitutes an important form of ecological expertise that has evolved through continuous interaction with nature.

One of the most significant contributions of rural women is found in agriculture. Across Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, and Sikkim, women actively participate in seed selection, cultivation, harvesting, food processing, and storage. Traditional farming systems often involve mixed cropping, crop rotation, organic fertilization,

and the conservation of indigenous seed varieties. These practices contribute to soil fertility, biodiversity conservation, and long-term agricultural sustainability.

Women also play a crucial role in preserving indigenous seed varieties that are adapted to local climatic conditions. Such seeds often demonstrate greater resilience to environmental stresses and contribute to food security. Through seed preservation and exchange practices, rural women help maintain agricultural biodiversity, which is increasingly threatened by commercial agriculture and monoculture farming.

Forests represent another important domain of women's ecological engagement. Many rural households depend on forests for fuel wood, medicinal plants, wild vegetables, fruits, and construction materials. Women possess extensive knowledge regarding sustainable harvesting techniques, seasonal resource availability, and biodiversity conservation. This knowledge enables communities to utilize forest resources without causing irreversible ecological damage.

Traditional medicinal knowledge further illustrates women's contribution to environmental sustainability. Rural women often serve as custodians of knowledge related to medicinal plants and herbal remedies. This knowledge supports community health while encouraging the conservation of plant diversity. The preservation of such knowledge systems is particularly important in an era characterized by biodiversity loss and the erosion of indigenous cultures.

Water resource management also highlights the environmental role of rural women. In many villages, women are primarily responsible for collecting, storing, and managing water for household use. Their daily experiences provide valuable insights into water availability, watershed health, and seasonal environmental changes. Consequently, women frequently become active participants in community efforts aimed at protecting water sources and promoting sustainable water management.

Beyond resource management, women contribute to environmental sustainability through collective action. Self-help groups, women's cooperatives, and community organizations

increasingly participate in activities such as afforestation, organic farming, waste management, and climate adaptation initiatives. These activities demonstrate how women's leadership can strengthen environmental governance at the grassroots level.

Ecofeminist perspectives emphasize that these contributions should not be interpreted merely as extensions of traditional gender roles. Rather, they represent forms of ecological agency that are essential for sustainable development. Rural women are not passive recipients of environmental policies but active actors whose knowledge and practices contribute directly to ecological resilience and sustainability.

Objective 3:

To explore the Challenges Faced by Rural Women and the Potential of Ecofeminist Approaches for Sustainable Development

Despite their substantial contributions to environmental sustainability, rural women in Northeast India continue to face numerous challenges that limit their participation in environmental governance and sustainable development processes.

Environmental degradation remains one of the most significant concerns. Deforestation, habitat destruction, soil erosion, and biodiversity loss have altered traditional resource-use patterns across the region. Since rural women depend heavily on forests and natural resources for their livelihoods, environmental degradation often increases their workload and vulnerability.

Climate change further intensifies these challenges. The Northeast region has experienced increased climatic variability, including floods, landslides, droughts, and irregular rainfall patterns. These environmental changes affect agricultural productivity, water availability, and food security. Rural women, who are primarily responsible for household food production and resource management, frequently bear the greatest burden of these impacts.

Development-induced displacement presents another critical challenge. Infrastructure projects, mining operations, hydroelectric dams, and urban expansion often lead to the displacement of local communities and the disruption of traditional livelihoods. Such processes can weaken community-based resource management systems and reduce women's access to land, forests, and water resources.

Socio-economic inequalities further constrain women's ability to participate effectively in environmental decision-making. Limited access to education, land ownership, financial resources, and institutional support reduces opportunities for leadership and participation. Although women contribute significantly to environmental management, they remain underrepresented in many governance institutions responsible for environmental planning and policy implementation.

The marginalization of indigenous knowledge within formal development frameworks also poses a significant challenge. Modern development policies frequently prioritize scientific and technological approaches while overlooking local ecological knowledge systems. As a result, valuable insights possessed by rural women often remain excluded from environmental decision-making processes.

Despite these challenges, ecofeminist approaches offer important opportunities for promoting sustainable development. Ecofeminism advocates for participatory governance, environmental justice, and the recognition of diverse knowledge systems. By acknowledging women's ecological expertise and strengthening their participation in environmental governance, policymakers can develop more inclusive and effective sustainability strategies.

Community-based conservation initiatives provide one promising pathway. Such approaches encourage local participation, respect indigenous knowledge, and support collaborative resource management. Rural women can play leadership roles within these initiatives, contributing both practical knowledge and environmental stewardship.

Gender-sensitive climate adaptation strategies also offer significant opportunities. Programmes that enhance women's access to education, technology, financial resources, and decision-making processes can strengthen community resilience to environmental change. Similarly, policies that recognize women's land rights and resource access can contribute to both social equity and environmental sustainability.

Ecofeminist approaches therefore provide a framework for addressing environmental challenges while simultaneously promoting gender justice. They encourage development models that prioritize ecological balance, social inclusion, and community well-being rather than purely economic objectives.

5. Discussion

The review demonstrates that ecofeminism offers a valuable lens through which environmental sustainability in Northeast India can be understood. The analysis highlights the central role of rural women in maintaining ecological systems through agriculture, biodiversity conservation, forest management, water resource protection, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge.

A key finding of the study is that rural women function as environmental custodians whose contributions often remain invisible within mainstream development discourse. Their ecological knowledge, developed through generations of interaction with local ecosystems, represents a critical resource for addressing contemporary environmental challenges. Such knowledge contributes not only to environmental conservation but also to food security, climate adaptation, and community resilience.

The study further reveals that environmental degradation and climate change disproportionately affect rural women because of their dependence on natural resources. However, rather than viewing women solely as victims of environmental change, ecofeminism emphasizes their agency and leadership in promoting sustainability.

Another important observation is the compatibility between eco feminist principles and indigenous environmental traditions found throughout Northeast India. Community-based resource management systems, collective conservation practices, and cultural respect for nature align closely with ecofeminist values of interconnectedness, reciprocity, and ecological responsibility.

Nevertheless, significant barriers remain. Structural inequalities, limited participation in governance, inadequate policy recognition, and the marginalization of indigenous knowledge continue to restrict women's potential contributions. Addressing these barriers requires institutional reforms and greater commitment to gender-inclusive environmental governance.

Conclusion

Ecofeminist perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the interconnected relationship between gender and environmental sustainability in Northeast India. The study demonstrates that rural women occupy a central position within ecological systems and contribute significantly to sustainable resource management through their knowledge, practices, and community engagement.

The analysis reveals that indigenous ecological knowledge, traditional agricultural practices, forest conservation efforts, and water management activities undertaken by rural women constitute important foundations for environmental sustainability. At the same time, environmental degradation, climate change, and socio-economic inequalities create substantial challenges that threaten both ecological systems and women's livelihoods.

Ecofeminism highlights the importance of recognizing women as active environmental agents rather than passive beneficiaries of development programmes. Sustainable development in Northeast India requires greater recognition of women's ecological expertise, enhanced participation in environmental decision-making, and stronger support for indigenous knowledge systems.

Ultimately, achieving environmental sustainability in the region depends upon integrating ecological conservation with gender justice. By embracing ecofeminist approaches, policymakers, researchers, and development practitioners can contribute to more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable futures for both rural communities and the natural environment.

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