

# The Role of Women in the Organic Farming Movement in India

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**Abstract:** *At present, the Organic Farming movement has become a social movement. People are forced to start thinking about the environment as the environment is depleting daily. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides used in agriculture are extremely harmful to the environment. In the age of environmental awareness, therefore, the organic farming movement is becoming very relevant. Women are playing a very important role in this organic farming movement. The role of women in the organic farming movement is discussed in this article. At the same time, an attempt has been made to find out the history of organic agriculture in India. Mahatma Gandhi opposed the development of Western style. Many of his followers advocated for the promotion of organic agriculture. Many people are feeling the need for organic farming again after the Green Revolution. At this time organic agriculture has become a social movement and women are at the forefront of this movement.*

**Key-word: Farming, Environment, Awareness, Development, Agriculture**

Today, the Organic Farming Movement has emerged as one of the social movements in the world.<sup>1</sup> Women are playing a very important role in this movement. In fact, the relation between women and agriculture is very close.<sup>2</sup> In the early stages of human civilization, women first discovered the technique of agriculture in the Neolithic Age.<sup>3</sup> And in the present situation, new ideas have emerged in agricultural system in view of the environmental crisis created by the human society for various reasons. The objective of organic farming is showing a new direction in agriculture. This agrarian system, as opposed to chemical fertilizers and pesticides on the one hand, is particularly emphasizing on sustainable development and agricultural systems. From that point of view, the organic movement has become one of the major branches of the environmental movement in the world.

In the beginning the term 'Environmentalism' was used in a very narrow sense. The term environmentalism was born in the nineteenth century as a protest movement in Western Europe and the United States against the bad effects of industrialization. Then environmentalism was associated with many romantic ideas. At that time, preservation of forests and wildlife was considered as the main concern of environmentalists. But since the Second World War, the scope of environmentalism has expanded. From the mid-sixties of twentieth century, water, soil, climate was also subjected to environmentalism. Another influential movement of the twentieth century is the women's movement, the women's liberation movement, which was developed in the 1980s, gradually related to the environmental movement. There is a new doctrine known as 'Eco-feminism'. It is important to note that French feminist thinker Francois Doban used the term Eco-feminism for the first time in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974). The ideas of eco feminism have evolved in different countries in different ways. Therefore, this concept is not uniform everywhere. It is possible to notice the variation. Despite the differences, everyone has agreed that women play an important role in maintaining the stability and sustainability of the environment.<sup>4</sup> In the book 'The First Sex', Elizabeth Gold Davis discusses the relationship between

men & nature and women & nature. She comments that men are enemies of nature. To establish equality through the destruction and slaughter is the inborn characteristic of men. On the other hand, women's only tendency is to become a friend of the nature, developing health, preserving natural balance. She is the natural leader of society and civilization. Men create chaos by devouring women's natural foundations.<sup>5</sup> That is, according to the proponents of eco-feminism, women can preserve their natural balance and make human beings habitable on earth. Women were at the forefront of the Chipko movement in India, the Greenbelt movement in Africa, the Narmada Bachao movement in India.

The agricultural system after the Green Revolution is doing great harm to the environment and ecosystem as well as is creating wealth-inequality in society.<sup>6</sup> Women have come forward to take the lead in the organic farming movement that started after the Green Revolution.

Organic farming has been linked to the movement to oppose a kind of discriminatory development. The concept of development is not an old one. After World War II, (date?), the leaders of the first world states noticed that newly liberated or struggling for independence third world countries were poorer than them, their productivity was backward and capital did not develop properly. The economic status of third world countries was judged on the basis of development of first world countries as ideal development. The decision is that these countries are the only way behind and the development of the western style is their only path. And for the development of the western style, the development of heavy industries, big technology and capital needs. After the Industrial Revolution, Europe's agricultural system underwent major changes. There came machines instead of livestock, farming instead of small agricultural holdings, chemical fertilizers and pesticides for high yields and large river dams for irrigation. Many third world countries at that time accepted Western capitalist development as the norm. But this 'huge development' has created discrimination in the society, causing irreparable damage to the environment and ecosystem, so there has been a need to rethink development. Although such opposition was initially opposed, such voices were suppressed in the dakkaniad of Western development.

Although organic farming has been consciously introduced in Europe since the 1920s, organic farming has begun much later in India. However, one must look at the agricultural history of India if she/he is looking for the source of organic agriculture.

Archaeological findings show the existence of the oldest agricultural fields in the Indian subcontinent. And in the traditional way, India has a thousand-year tradition of agricultural work. Sir Albert Howard, whose contribution in formulating the policy of modern organic agriculture, called the father of modern organic agriculture, was inspired by the traditional method of agriculture in India. While in India at work, he deeply observed the traditional farming system. His associate in this case was his wife Gabriela (1876-1930). The aim of the present article is to evaluate the contribution of women to the organic farming movement, so this article will try to highlight the role of women thinkers and activists in the movement.

When looking at the history of organic agriculture, two types of organic farming can be found in the Indian subcontinent. The first type of organic agriculture was practiced in India for thousands of years. The second type of organic agriculture started after the Green Revolution, which subsequently evolved from environmental awareness. The second type of organic farming worker was Gabriella Howard. Because she applied the knowledge of modern science to the traditional agricultural system. The Howard couple deserves the credit of playing the role of the pioneers of the organic farming movement. Gabriela was born in the merchant family in Kingston, England. His father was a noble businessman. She studied botany at Newnham College, Cambridge University. After completing her education, she started

working as an assistant under Frederick Blackman. It was during this time that Black Man and Gabriella jointly discovered the role of heat in the process of photosynthesis.

In 1905, she married Albert Howard, imperial economic botanist to the government of India. The couple invariably did their research together and soon became known as the "Sidney and Beatrice Webb of India". In 1913, Gabrielle Howard became the second imperial economic botanist to the government of India. Between 1905 and 1924, the Howards carried out research on crops such as cotton and wheat at their experiment station at Pusa, and ran a fruit experiment station at Quetta from 1912 until 1919.<sup>7</sup>

Albert Howard noticed that crops in the fields of farmers outside the institute often seemed healthier than his own, even though they didn't use the latest techniques, like chemical fertilizing. He started studying their traditional methods- of animals raised alongside crops, with their wastes, and other plant wastes forming the only fertilizers. Howard was an expert in fungi and he theorized that traditional methods nurtured fungi and microbes in the soil, leading to better soil health than what was created by artificial means. Howard's theories would lay the principles for the Organic Farming Movement. <sup>8</sup>Howard developed and popularized what he called the Indore process, a method of combining animal and plant wastes to ensure rapid decomposition into a form that could be used in farming - a scientific system for composting. This method became very popular at that time. The one who contributed most to popularize this method was Gabriella. Mahatma Gandhi also heard about it and felt it fitted his concept of village technology.

Gandhiji's follower Mira Ben (1892-1982), whose original name was Madeleine Slade, played an important role in popularizing organic agriculture. She was a British woman who left her home in Britain to live and work with Mohandas Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi opposed heavy industrialization in India. In 1928 Mahatma Gandhi had said: "God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts."<sup>9</sup>

Several of Gandhi's followers developed a theory of environmentalism. J. C. Kumarappa was the first, writing a number of relevant books in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>10</sup> Historian Ramchandra Guha calls him "The Green Gandhian," portraying him as the founder of modern environmentalism in India.<sup>11</sup> He and Mira Behan argued against large-scale dam-and-irrigation projects, saying that small projects were more efficacious, that organic manure was better and less dangerous than man-made chemicals. Mira Ben continued writing in support of organic agriculture. As Mira Behn wrote in 1949:

"The tragedy today is that educated and moneyed classes are altogether out of touch with the vital fundamentals of existence – our Mother Earth, and the animal and vegetable population which she sustains. This world of Nature's planning is ruthlessly plundered, despoiled and disorganized by man whenever he gets the chance. By his science and machinery, he may get huge returns for a time, but ultimately will come desolation. We have got to study Nature's balance, and develop our lives within her laws, if we are to survive as a physically healthy and morally decent species."<sup>12</sup>

The above statement clearly shows how conscious she was about protecting the environment.

Vandana Shiva is the biggest proponent of India's Organic Farming movement. Not only in India but throughout the world, she is known as one of the leading faces of the Organic Farming movement. She has received various international honors for her work. She is perhaps best known, however, as a critic of Asia's Green Revolution, an international effort that began in the 1960s to increase food

production in less-developed countries through higher-yielding seed stocks and the increased use of pesticides and fertilizers. The Green Revolution, she maintained, had led to pollution, a loss of indigenous seed diversity and traditional agricultural knowledge, and the troubling dependence of poor farmers on costly chemicals. Vandana Shiva wants to highlight the consequences of the Green Revolution to the world.<sup>13</sup>

She has worked to promote biodiversity in agriculture to increase productivity, nutrition, farmer's incomes and It is for this work she was recognized as an 'Environmental Leader' by Time magazine in 2003. Her work on agriculture started in 1984 after the violence in Punjab and the Bhopal disaster. She has authored more than twenty books. *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology, and Politics* is a famous book written by her. In this book she tries to find the cause of Punjab Violence in the background of the Green Revolution. She is one of the leading leaders in the anti-globalization movement in agriculture.<sup>14</sup> Central to Shiva's work is the idea of seed freedom, or the rejection of corporate patents on seeds. She has fought against attempted patents of several indigenous plants, such as basmati. She is fiercely opposed to genetically modified (G.M) foods. She strongly opposes golden rice, a breed of rice that has been genetically engineered.

Not only highly educated women like Vandana Shiva, so-called illiterate women have come forward in this movement. The indigenous people have preserved their agricultural heritage for thousands of years. It is important to mention here that tribal communities have been the most affected in the so-called development in India. The indigenous people want to preserve their traditional knowledge and heritage. Among the tribal women leading the Organic Movement in India, Kamala Pujari is the most prominent name.<sup>15</sup> She was born in a poor family in a tribal-dominated village in Koraput district, Odisha, Kamala Pujari has always been fascinated with traditional paddy seeds. Because of this she started cultivating indigenous paddy on her own land. Over the years, Kamala has successfully preserved hundreds of indigenous paddies, and has also collected several endangered and rare types of seeds including paddy, turmeric, tili, black cumin, and mahakanta. Kamala's efforts were recognized on a national level when Indian Government conferred her with the Padmashri in 2019.<sup>16</sup> Prior to this, Kamala had received several awards, including 'Best Women Farmer' by the Odisha state government in 2004.

This article would remain incomplete without discussing the contributions of Rohibai Popre, the leader of the organic farming movement in Maharashtra. She has no formal education. Popere focuses on women-led agro-biodiversity. She has conserved almost fifty acres of ingenious farmland, where she grows 17 different crops. She works with 3,500 farmers, sharing her knowledge and experiments. About 122 landraces of 32 crops are under conservation in her seed bank.

Today, her efforts are being recognized. Various organisations have conferred her with awards and the BBC has included her in the list of 100 inspiring and influential women worldwide.<sup>17</sup>

Many times the question arises whether the feminism and the Organic Farming movement is against development or not. Can organic agriculture meet the food needs of a growing population? Or again, it will bring back the famine condition. It is not yet time to answer the question of whether it is possible to replace chemical based farming by the Organic Farming against the Green Revolution. However, it can be said that as the current environmental problems are escalating dramatically, natural resources like drinking water are constantly eroding, it is expected that in this situation, the Organic Farming movement will find a new path.

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