

Women and the Wild: How Female Led Initiatives Fuels Nature Conservation across India

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Abstract: The Indian subcontinent owing to its diverse eco climatic regions and biomes has resulted in booming of its wildlife diversity which inhabits across the length and breath of the nation from the snow-capped Himalayas to the wet evergreen forests of North eastern India as well as to the scrub forests of Gir and the adjoining areas. However civilization and nature treads a thin line of coexistence which in the recent years have dwindled to a mere shadow of the past as a result of rapid urbanization, industrialization and thus change in cultural norms in which the forests and nature were revered thus alluding a form of protection to them. However as the pace of modernization takes hold newer initiatives are required to restore the fragile balance which sometimes may not need to be punitive or in some cases may even be unconventional or outright out of the box. This is where the role of ecologists, conservations and wildlife officials come into play where they take on the mantle of a teacher, observer and scientist to let communities establish a harmonious relationship with nature for which Women led initiatives require a huge applause ranging from IFS officer Dr. Sonali Ghosh to eminent zoologist and conservationist Dr. Purnima Devi Barman.

Keywords: Women, conservation, wildlife, community, rehabilitation

Introduction:

The entirety of India encompasses a total of 306.5 million hectare of total reported land area with forest cover amounting to a total of 71.8 million hectare and net sown area of 139.4 million hectare for agricultural purposes in order to feed the mouths of 1.5 billion souls residing in it. Apart from feeding such a massive population, it also requires to maintain the delicate ecological balance among the different biomes to prevent the systemic collapse at different trophic levels of the food chain. The measures in order to combat such problems merely not need to be of a legal nature but can diverge in a multitude of ways ranging from community based teaching and hands on learning approach to wide scale AI based monitoring gadgets and machineries to identify and track down would be routes of smuggling and illegal consumption of wildlife products and pet trade. With the advent of civilization into the lands earlier under the Purdue of Mother Nature time has come to ensure literacy and education into the minds of the general folk regarding coexistence with flora and fauna and respecting their autonomy as well. Especially keeping in mind that 2026 has been declared as Year of Women Farmer and International year of volunteers for sustainable development thus women and their importance towards ensuring a sustainable future cannot be overlooked.

1. Case Study No.1: Stork Sisters

Nestled in the far reaches of India, lies the villages of Dadara, Pacharia on the outskirts of the kamrup district. Here the humble beginnings of the famous conservation Dr Purnima Devi Barman takes flight. She started her work while still engaged in her PhD work by saving the fledglings of Greater Adjutant (*Leptoptilos dubius*) who had taken up a tree as their abode nearby human habitation and was prepared to be cut down on an account of belief that these birds are harbingers of festering disease, death and other maladies. Judging the dire situation of bird who's population had come down to mere 600's during that era (2007) and on the verge of collapse, she took upon the mantle of conserving and act as the saviour of the species.

Upon gaining the initially negative feedback surrounding the bird, she devised a brilliant plan of incorporating the womenfolk themselves to partake in the conservation of this rather overlooked bird. She organized street plays, speeches for the villagers as well as encouraged the women to celebrate the hatching of the chicks with a traditional baby shower type ceremony.

To top it off she started several NGO's and workshops that mobilized a lot of women by allowing them to produce several nature and Hargila (Greater Adjutant) themed embroideries, mekhela chador and an ensemble of commodities that ended up adding to their income thus allowing them to embrace this bird which was earlier persecuted.

Dr Purnima Devi Barman is herself the recipient of the prestigious Whitley Awards otherwise referred to as “Green Oscars” and the Nari Shakti Puraskar Award by the then President of India which the highest women exclusive civilian award. However her greatest achievement lies not in the awards but the efficacy with which she dealt with the dwindling species and saved it from the verge of extinction while maintain harmony between communities and nature.

2. Case No.2: Dr Sonalighosh, Sentinel of the Kaziranga

Sometimes the burning passion for the love of nature knows no bounds as seen in the case of Dr Sonali Ghosh, topper of Indian Forest Service batch of 2000-2003 armed with degrees including a doctorate in remote sensing tech for conservation of tigers in Indo Bhutan Manas Landscape. She has devoted wholeheartedly to her passion since her masters days in Wildlife Institute of India. Being born into a family of Army background she has ever since harboured a deep interest or desire for nature and its surroundings.

A few of her achievements include the successful recognition of community based protection for Golden Langur (*Trachypitecus geei*) in the tribal heartlands of Kokrajhar wherein she was posted as DFO. She also partook and successfully rehabilitated one of the earliest cubs of captive bred clouded leopards (*Neofelis nebulosa*) as form of Ex-Situ conservation back into their natural habitat. Apart from it she has also engaged herself ardently to combat a retinue of threats from poaching and other illegal activities taking place in Manas National park and Kaziranga National park.

For her herculean efforts she was awarded the prestigious WCPA-kenton miller award by IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) and in the process being the first Indian to be able to do so all while inspiring the newer generation to come forward and do their part in conservation of Nature.

3. Case No. 3: The Bishnois: From the Echoes of Khejrali

The Bishnoi community is perhaps one of the most well documented examples of man and nature coexisting peacefully over millennia. The examples of the community’s dedication towards taking care of the nature and denizens of the scrub forest date back long ago. One of the examples of incidents which solidified this community’s name synonymous to sacrifice for preservation of nature date back to 1730 when Amrita Devi Bishnoi spearheaded the efforts for conservation of Khejri trees (*Prosopis cineraria*) which were marked for being cut down on the account of royal orders of being used to build a new palace. In the process she and her countless comrades sacrificed their lives by hugging the tree in “Chipko” fashion thereby shielding the trees with their bodies and thus also paved the way by acting as a predecessor to Chipko movement in 1970’s by environmentalist Sunderlal Bahuguna and Gauri Devi.

Apart from it there are numerous recorded instances of them taking care of orphaned animals like fawns of deer and treating them like one’s own children, thereby setting an example never seen before or matched thereof.

Analysis and Conclusion:

The three case studies are different in their own way yet they share an important idea that is people are more likely to protect nature when they feel connected to it and believe that its future is also their future. Women in particular can bring valuable local knowledge, community connection and leadership to this process.

The stories of Purnima Devi Barman, Dr Sonali Ghosh and the bishnois remind us that there isn’t no set way to protect nature, it can begin with an idea in a village, a traditional belief or simply deciding something is truly ought to be worth protecting.

India’s conservation journey still has many challenges, but these stories offer an important reminder, when women are given a voice in conservation, they do not simply become a part of the story, they can help shape it.

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