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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### BISHNOI MOVEMENT OF KHEJARLI: A SOCIO-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

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#### Abstract

This paper analyses the role of the Bishnoi community in protection of the environment, focusing on wild life and vegetation. It also describes the principles of Bishnoism which are related with conservation and protection of environment and wild life. The Bishnoi community is one of the first organized supporters of environment conservation, wildlife protection and green living. The Bishnoi community is considered as the first environmentalist community in India. Their shared community knowledge, intellectual property of the community and their social education based on the community history has always been associated with preservation of environment. For Centuries, the faith of the Bishnoi community has been intertwined with principles of eco-conservation, thereby making their lived geographies very relevant in today's growing environmental consciousness. The paper highlights the role of Amrita Devi Bishnoi in the Khejarli Movement. Lastly this paper describes the Bishnoi movement and concludes that Bishnoism can be considered as a pioneer community in the field of environment conservation.

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#### Introduction:-

"Sar sāntey rūkh rahe to bhī sasto jān"

(If one tree is saved at the cost of the one's head, it's worth it. Heads lost, trees saved, consider it good deal! It is better to sacrifice your head to save a tree. Accepting price for your sacrifice becomes a stigma on your sacrifice) - Amrita Devi Bishnoi.

Environmental movement is an umbrella term which includes all kind of local struggle and conflicts related with the livelihood issues and ecological security. Environmental movements are always interlinked and interactive with similar kinds of other social movements associated with peace-building, safeguarding of human rights etc. Environmental movements always advocate sustainable management of natural resources. The movements have frequently emphasised on the protection and long-term preservation of the environment via institutionalized changes in public policy. Many movements are focused on ecology, health and human rights etc. The nature of environment movements vary from highly organized to radically unorganized activities. Sometimes geographical scope of environment movements ranges from being local to global in nature. An environmental movement can be defined as a socio-political movement for the protection and conservation of environment and wildlife or a movement for the improvement of condition of the environment. The terms 'green movement' or 'conservation movement' are also used to describe same movements.

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This paper narrates the origin of the Bishnoi sect focusing on their principles for environment conservation. It goes on to describe their Khejarli Movement for protecting Khejri trees and connects the two as an environmental movement arising out of their collective community knowledge based upon their principles of safeguarding environment. Lastly, it describes the role of Amrita Devi Bishnoi in the Khejarli movement.

### **Environmental Movements in India:**

Environmental movements of different parts of the world emerged due to a number of different reasons and they have adhered to local as well as global perspectives. The main reason for emergence of environmental movements of different states in India is conflict of control over natural resources and forest area. There are broadly two kinds of environmental movements in the world according to their nature and issues they raise. The environmental movements of the Global North are mainly related with the maintenance of quality of life whereas movements of the Global South are centered within conflicts for control of natural resources. In India, environment movements are mainly related with tribal, poor and marginalized people, those living in the forest, whose livelihood are directly affected by environmental degradation and they are prime victim of natural imbalance of environment. Such movements includes: Bishnoi Movement (1700's), Chipko Movement (1973), Silent Valley Movement (1978), Jungle Bachao Andolan (1982), Appiko Movement (1983), Narmada Bachao Andolan (1985), Tehri Dam Conflicts (1990's) etc.

### **Bishnoi Movement:**

Bishnoi movement has a legacy of a remarkable 500 years, started by a sage known as Jambhaji. In Western Rajasthan, large number of devotees of Jambhaji worship trees and takes care of them. They resisted cutting of trees and advocated organized forms of mobilisations to save and protect bio-diversity. In the history of environmental movements, this was the movement which, for the first time, used the strategy of hugging and embracing trees for their protection.

### **Objectives of Movement:-**

The movement had four major objectives:

1. Conservation of bio-diversity to ensure eco-friendly social life for community.
2. Promoting personal hygiene to ensure healthy life.
3. Advocacy against cutting of trees.
4. Preservation of bio-diversity and animal husbandry.

### **Bishnoism: Origin and Principles:**

In the year of 1485, the sect 'Bishnoism' was founded by Guru Jambheshwar, who was born in a Rajput Jamindar (feudal lord) family of Western Rajasthan in modern day Nagaur district of Rajasthan. He is also known as 'Jambhaji'. He laid down 29 principles for his followers and advocated to follow these principles. The term 'Bishnoi' is derived from two Hindi words 'Bish' means 20 and 'Noi' means 9, thus Bishnoi translates as Twenty nine (29). Out of his 29 principles or tenets, ten are for maintaining personal hygiene and good basic health, nine for healthy and good social behaviour, four principles or tenets about worship of God and remaining six principles or tenets are about conservation and preservation of Bio-diversity and animal husbandry. Out of these six principles or tenets which focus on conservation of bio-diversity two are most profound: 1) "Jeev Daya Palani" -Be compassionate to all living beings; 2) "Runkh Lila Nahi Ghave"-Do not cut green trees. These principles not only protect and conserve wild life and bio-diversity of the area but also ensure eco-friendly social life. Contemporary modern societies hardly believe that Bishnoi women breastfeed babies of black deer and chinkara and take care of them as their own children. It shows the commitment of Bishnoi to such values that has helped them to survive and also ensure the survival of the fragile desert ecosystem of Western Rajasthan. Those who practice these 29 principles are known as 'BISHNOI'. The Bishnoi is non violent and nature worshipper community of western India located in Western Rajasthan.

### **Amrita Devi and Bishnoi Movement:**

On a Tuesday morning (According to Indian Lunar Calendar it was 10<sup>th</sup> day of Bhadrapad) in 1730 A.D., Amrita Devi, a Bishnoi woman was busy with her household chores at home with her three daughters (Ashu, Ratni and Bhagu Bai) when she heard that large number of people has entered in their sleepy village of Khejarli, breaking the silence of the village with horse hoof. The village name Khejarli is derived from Hindi word Khejri (Prosopis Cineraria), because these trees were found in large number in the village. These people were sent by the then ruler of Jodhpur, Maharaja Abhay Singh, who wanted to cut trees for purpose of construction of a new palace. There were

many other trees in the Bishnoi villages even in the middle of the Thar Desert, but the king ordered to cut these trees of Khejri to melt lime stone. Amrita Devi decided to oppose cutting of trees and hug the trees and encouraged other to do the same, proclaiming: "Sar sāntey rūkh rahe to bhī sasto jān" (If one tree is saved at the cost of the one's head, it's worth it). Prime reason behind to oppose tree cutting was embedded in the cultural belief of the Bishnoi community as described in the principles of their sect, advocating protection of tree and wild life conservation. Another reason was immediately related with their rural livelihood, as they depended on the forest for the supply of fuel wood and fodder. Bishnoi from Khejarli and other villages came to join this agitation and hugged the Khejri trees one by one to protect trees being cut at the cost of their head. This voluntary sacrifice continued until 363 Bishnoi villagers were killed to protect and save Khejri trees and forest. Various researches revealed that people from 49 villages sacrificed their lives in this massacre, 294 them were men and 69 were women, and 36 them were married couples including one newly married. This massacre is believed to have happened on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 1730.

As soon as the Maharaja heard the news of this massacre, he rushed to Khejarli village and apologized to the villagers, ordering soldiers to stop the cutting of trees. Soon after that, Maharaja designated Bishnoi villages as protected areas and prohibited harm to trees and animals. This legislation is still upheld and practiced in the region.

### Conclusion:-

While research scholars and media have celebrated Indian women environmentalists and activists such as Medhapatkar, Arundhati Roy, Gaura Devi, and Vandana Shiva among others as eco-feminism, they have rarely mentioned Amrita Devi Bishnoi. She led one of the first mobilized movements for the protection of trees which resulted in massive sacrifice of people to save trees in the village of Khejarli near Jodhpur. 363 Bishnoi men and women led by Amrita Devi Bishnoi sacrificed their lives for the protection of Khejri trees from the soldiers of Jodhpur king which highlights a collective community effort to protect their environment.

Such kind of motivation, capability of even overcoming the instinct of self-preservation can be understood in the presence of extremely stable moral foundation and with values. This extraordinary foundation base was poured many centuries ago by someone who himself had always survived a famine. The concept of tree-hugging and tree huggers has roots in history of Bishnoism in year of 1730 A.D. This movement and sacrifice not only inspired the 'Chipko Movement' 20<sup>th</sup> Century led by Sunder Lal Bahuguna but also Government of India in the form of 'Amrita Devi Bishnoi Wildlife Protection Award' and Government of Rajasthan in the form of 'Amrita Devi Bishnoi Smriti Paryavaran Award' for contributing to the protection of wildlife and environment conservation respectively.

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