

WOMEN: GUARDIANS OF HERITAGE AND NATURE

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Throughout human history, women have played a vital, though often quiet, role in safeguarding both culture and the natural environment. In India, this connection is particularly strong, as seen in the festival of *Navratri*, which celebrates the feminine divine and highlights women's significant impact on society and nature.

Indian tradition reveres women as manifestations of *Shakti*, the fundamental cosmic energy. This belief goes beyond religious reverence, reflecting a deep recognition of women's roles in nurturing families and the earth. The Atharvaveda's reference to 'Mother Earth' (*Prithvi Mata*) emphasizes the ancient understanding of the connection between femininity and the nurturing qualities of nature.

Women have long been the guardians of traditional knowledge, preserving biodiversity and sustainable practices. Environmentalist Dr. Vandana Shiva has pointed out that women farmers have maintained indigenous seed varieties, which helps secure food supplies and uphold cultural traditions. Each seed holds a story or ritual, making women the custodians of both agriculture and cultural heritage. In modern India, women have been central to key environmental movements.

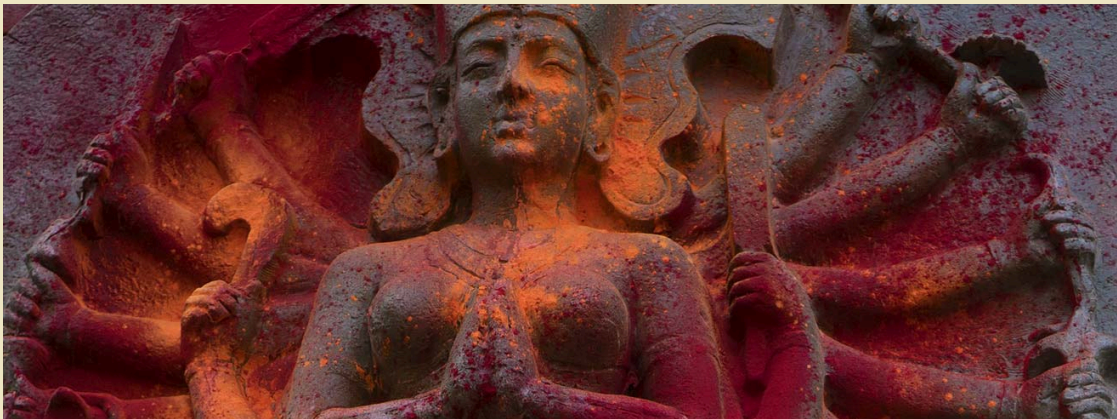
A prime example is the Chipko movement of the 1970s, where women hugged trees to prevent deforestation.

Gaura Devi, a leader of this movement, famously stated, "*This forest nurtures us like a mother; you must kill me before cutting it down,*" highlighting their deep connection to nature.

Navratri, a festival dedicated to the goddess Durga, symbolizes the diverse roles women play in both society and the environment. Traditions like planting barley seeds in Gujarat during the festival demonstrate the inherent link between cultural practices and ecological awareness.

Even today, as the world faces environmental challenges such as climate change and urbanization, women continue to lead conservation efforts. From Medha Patkar's leadership in the *Narmada Bachao Andolan* to women spearheading urban waste management projects, they are at the forefront of protecting ecosystems and communities. The wisdom passed down through generations of women offers valuable insights into sustainable living as we confront modern environmental crises.





Supporting women in environmental science and cultural preservation is not only important for social progress but essential for ecological balance.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "To call women the weaker sex is a libel." Women have consistently shown their strength through their dedication to protecting nature and culture. It's time to fully acknowledge their role and actively support their efforts toward a more sustainable and harmonious future.