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## A study on genesis and development of Eco-feminist movement in central India

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### Abstract

The Tree Woman of India Mrs. Suniti Yadav is the Founder of Eco-feminist Movement in central India. About 25 years ago she successfully synthesized humane and religious sentiments for forest protection so that both religion and the human environment can be upheld. Forests holds a very prominent place in Indian culture and trees are symbol of eternal truth that mankind have always been giving reverence. With help of creative and affectionate mothers, sisters and children she motivated people to tie sacred threads [Rakhi] around trees to create wide spread awareness about importance of conserving our natural resources in general and trees in particular every year on the eve of Raksha Bandhan Festival in 1992. It has been regarded as the Second Wave of world fame Chipko Movement because what it is trying to conserve is not merely few trees here and there but the entire life support system and with it, the option for human survival.

**Keywords:** Religion, forest conservation, people participation, sacred thread, green movement, central India.

### Introduction

During late eighties, a woman in remote tribal district of Raigarh realized that women are an intimate part of nature both in imagination and in practice. At one level, nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance. Women in the villages of 'underdeveloped' economies like India are the primary managers of the natural resources available to them. They do most of the work on the farm and in taking care of the livestock. This "living environment" of soil, water, forests and energy form the patterns of their daily lives from sun rise to sun set. In addition, women also participate in buying and selling of agricultural produce. The raw materials they use in their crafts and tool making also come from nature and are vulnerable to environmental degradation. As farmers and traders, women experience environmental problems directly undermining the basis of their lives. This link between environment and women is obvious, but rarely acknowledged. So Suniti Yadav started her unique eco feminist movement in central India in mission mode.

She believes that "Forestry is not simply a question of tree; it is above all a question for survival of human beings." India has got 15% of the world human population and 16% of cattle population but it has less than 1% of the total productive forest area of the world. The combined effect of these biotic pressures on natural resources is much beyond the carrying capacity and the problem is much acute in rural areas where more than 67% of the Indian population lives. Thus the Forest Department together with people have a Herculean task to save their natural resources and people's participation in this endeavour is the only solution in present socio-economic and political environment.

Forests holds a very prominent place in Indian culture and trees are symbol of eternal truth that mankind have always been giving reverence. In the Holy Veda it has been truly said that "Preserved trees preserve us". Mrs. Yadav believes that the speed of environmental pollution may pose a difficult situation and we might not be able to find a solution overnight. So we have to develop an emotional identity with trees especially among women to protect them. Inspired by the outcome of Rio Earth Summit she started a unique Eco feminist Movement with her basic philosophy "Trees are our brothers" in the central region of India in July 1992. With help of creative and affectionate mothers, sisters and children she motivated people to tie sacred threads [Rakhi] around trees to create wide spread awareness about importance of conserving our natural resources in general and trees in particular every year on the eve of Raksha Bandhan Festival. The basic philosophy behind this programme can be summarized in words of late Prime Minister of India Smt. Indira Gandhi:

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“The interest in conservation is not a sentimental one but the rediscovery of a truth well known to our ancient sages. Modern man must reestablish an unbroken link with nature and with life.” She further said that: “Survival of man depends upon the survival of plants and animals.”

Suniti Yadav approached President of India and Minister of Environment and Forests for their moral support to this movement in 1994. Encouraged with the blessings of Late Shankar Dayal Sharma ji the then President of India and Mr. Kamal Nath the then Forest and Environment Minister she started the programme in big way. During initial period many senior leaders, social workers, intellectuals like Mrs. Maneka Gandhi, Mr. Digvijay Singh, Mr. Suresh Prabhu, late Mr. Subhash Yadav; environmentalist like Late Dr. T.N. Khushoo, Late Dr. Anil Agrwal, Mr. C.P. Oberai the then Inspector General of Forests, Prof. M.S. Swaminathan and common people have appreciated and encouraged this unique programme in which no expenditure is evolved but has a wide spread implication.

In less than one decade the Vriksha Raksha Sutra Programme is being celebrated all over the Chhattisgarh and 8 other states like Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, Orissa and Jharkhand. The programme is recognized by media as a new version of the world fame Chipko Movement because what it is trying to conserve is not merely few trees here and there but the entire life support system and with it, the option for human survival. During last 22 years she has sensitized our society specially women - the major stakeholders in environmental problems that “Protection of mature trees are as important as planting new ones”.

The programme is very effective for protection of forests and is very popular among the Forest Protection Committees constituted under the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme throughout Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh states. The Vriksha Raksha Sutra Programme is also very effective in urban areas for protecting planted trees specially Neem. Due to efforts of Smt. Yadav the District administration, educational institutions and people's representatives have integrated Vriksha Raksha Sutra Programme in their plantation activities during the *Hareli Jagar*, Hariyar Chhattisgarh (Green Festival) all over state.

Since 2000 Mrs. Suniti Yadav is requesting all Head of States in world including the Presidents and Prime Minister of India, all ambassadors and diplomats, international organizations like United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP], UNESCO, FAO, WWF, CITES, C.B.D., Nobel Laureates, government officials and nature loving people to celebrate this Tree Protection Festival on international scale. No wonder, it is the only festival which can be celebrated by people of all religions and is a very effective medium for global aspiration and cooperative endeavour to save our earth. In 2001, the Hon'ble Governor of Chhattisgarh State Mr. Dinesh Nandan Sahai inaugurated the "Vriksha Raksha Sutra Festival" at Bhilai. He emphasized the need for celebrating this programme for one week so that the conservation message could be percolate to the gross root level.

On her request Forest Department Jharkhand has initiated this green tradition in Palamau, Dhanbad, Chatra, Koderma and Hazaribagh districts in 2001. Now hundreds of villages in Jharkhand practice this unique ritual on the eve of the state's foundation day fortnight, starting November 15. And, thanks to the villagers' enthusiasm, the celebrations continue right up to the New Year.

In 2004 the Governor of Chhattisgarh Lt. General [Retd.] K.M. Seth has integrated this unique environmental festival with the Independence Day of India. He along with his wife tied the sacred protection thread around tree in the Governor House in Raipur on 15th August 2004 and underlined the importance of trees for human survival.

The Vriksha Raksha Sutra Programme has generated massive awareness among the people for protection of environment. Due to her zeal and untiring efforts she is popularly known as the *Ped wali Bai* [Tree Woman of India]. The Indian Institute of Management Ahmadabad, Indian Institute of Forest Management, Bhopal, Indian Institute of Bio social Research Kolkata & other institution have appreciated this programme and recommended its replication all over the country.

On her request the then President of India Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and Prime Minister of India Dr. Manmohan Singh have directed the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Govt. of India to issue a circular in April 2004 to all State Forest Departments for integration of the Vriksha Raksha Sutra Programme in plantation activities. In 2006 students of Chennai's Velammal Vidyalaya tied Rakhis to trees under a unique programme planned by Exnora International, a city based voluntary forum, and hosted it within the sprawling gardens of the Governor's house. It was Governor Surjit Singh Barnala himself who led the students by tying a Rakhi around a plant. About 50 girl students followed suit and tied Rakhis around trees to express their love and affection to the plant kingdom. In return they hoped for a cleaner and better environment.

On the eve of India's 60th Independence Day Mrs. Suniti Yadav has organized her tree protection festival in Singapore with the support of many culturally diversified communities. She has inspired students of local colleges to tie the sacred thread to more than 5000 trees in this beautiful island country. It has opened a new chapter in the global green movement. People have appreciated this green venture and the conservation spirit to create awareness, and as a reminder to treat the environment as a living entity and friend. It was also a joyful and symbolic expression of solidarity with nature. One can imagine children around the world leading this common cause and inspiring and awakening adults to take responsible and timely measures.

In 2009 on initiatives of JFM committees members women from villages near this town in Himachal Pradesh's Sirmour district tied Rakhis — a sacred thread symbolizing the brother-sister bond — on the trees as the dam aimed at providing drinking water to New Delhi will inundate them. “It's a noble way to draw the attention of dam authorities to the voluminous damage to biodiversity in the area with its construction,” said Rukhmani Devi of Mohtu village, in Sirmour district.

In August 2010 the Tree Protection Festival has been celebrated at various places in Pakistan also. People specially women in Thar region have realized the importance of trees in controlling floods and other natural calamities in Nangarparkar-Adhihgam. Pakistan Today has reported that on 13<sup>th</sup> August 2011, women in the Thar Desert have been observed tying Rakhi threads around the rare indigenous trees that are on verge of extinction. Bharumal, coordinator of the Society for Conservation and Protection of Environment (Scope). Bharumal says Scope tried creating awareness about the importance of the Gugral among residents and even organised a colourful Rakhi Bandhan festival last year, during which hundreds of women tied Rakhis (strips of cloth) to the Gugral trees, declaring them 'brothers'. The Forest

Department of Pakistan actively supported this movement by motivating its field officers in various provinces.

In 2010, Jharkhand Forests Department has launched a campaign to tie Rakhi to trees in order to save forests in Gumla District. The department took an innovative step of getting nearby villagers to bind strips of cloth around the trees in a ceremony similar to the traditional Raksha Bandhan. The villagers in Gumla District tied pieces of cloth around tree trunks and branches and set themselves up as protectors of the trees. This initiation from forest department prevent villagers from cutting down trees.

In July 2010 the United Nation Environment Programme [UNEP] has appreciated this endeavour and authorized her Green Guardian Society to use its logo for the " Billion Tree Campaign " In August 2010 the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Montreal, Canada has commended the Tree Protection Festival and has included it in its own programme calendar. One can see the posting at <http://www.cbd.int/2010/calendar/>. Again in 2012 CBD has appreciated it and posted on [www.facebook.com/UNBiodiversity](http://www.facebook.com/UNBiodiversity).

On the eve of Rakshabandhan 2011 Mr. Nitish Kumar, Chief Minister of Bihar along with his cabinet tied Rakhi to tree and inaugurated Save Tree Campaign in Bihar. Nitish Kumar said: 'I request people with folded hands to tie rakhis to trees to protect the environment. It will be a new beginning to save the earth and human beings.' He was followed by his deputy Sushil Kumar Modi, who also tied a long cotton rakhi to the trunk of a tree in Rajdhani Vatika here. Since then it is a regular practice in Patna to honour tree brothers by tying Rakhi to them.

In response to Mrs. Suniti Yadav's appeal to all political parties in India on 13th August 2011 to create environmental awareness, women Congress workers today celebrated Raksha bandhan by tying rakhis to trees in Mussoorie [Dehradun]. They gathered on the Mall road and after performing traditional rituals tied rakhis to trees near Garhwal Terrace. They also pledged to protect the trees and treat them as brothers.

"As trees play an important role in our lives, we decided to express our gratitude towards the trees by tying rakhis to them," said Geeta Kumain, president of the Mussoorie Mahila Congress. Sweets were also distributed to mark the occasion. Environmentalists and conversationalists have hailed this decision of the women and appealed to other parties to follow the same to protect the trees.

The forest department's idea of using the Raksha Bandhan to save trees from being felled was basically meant to make the locals invest enough in the forests that they protect. The initiative was implemented in 25 villages and covered 1,000 hectares of forest area. "With the help of people and our relatives, we are able to protect trees. We are saving trees so that we will get tree leaves and fresh air. Today, all of us have come together to save forest trees with the help of Raksha Bandhan ceremony. We celebrate this ceremony on March 13," said Jaydeep Muda, a villager. With the villagers' active participation, the forest department is hopeful that the trees in the dense forests of Gumla district will not be felled.

On request of Mrs. Suniti Yadav many film personalities and media houses have joined this mission. For example , RJ's ties Rakhi to the plants across Delhi & NCR 23 August 2010: 92.7 BIG FM, a radio initiative of Reliance Broadcast Network Limited on the occasion of Raksha Bandhan, gets Sanjana Jon, Fashion Designer to flag off the BIG- Raksha Bandhan green initiative at BIG FM studio 92.7 BIG FM garnered the

efforts of Delhiites which made Raksha Bandhan turn out a more green and sincere affair by encouraging people to indulge in an innocent yet responsible gesture of tying rakhi to plants and trees. Today in India, when the country is grappling with increasing incidents of deforestation and environmental pollution, this yet another green festive campaign from 92.7 BIG FM camp comes with a strong sense of social message.

In the capital of India Delhiites were excited to be a part of this modern age initiative, via which they could be seen proud of extending their support towards the deteriorating environment. 92.7 BIG FM gratified on-air contest winners with a plant, rakhi and sweets.

Commenting on the green initiative of the camp, Mr. Ashwin Padmanabhan, Station Head, BIG FM, Delhi, said "Post the ASLI NO 1 green initiative, this Raksha bandhan 92.7 BIG FM goes green to create awareness to take an affirmative action against environment.

Sanjana Jon expressed," It means 'a bond of protection', and Raksha Bandhan signifies that the strong must protect the weak from all that's evil. Its not just for family but beyond as well and emulates need for a harmonious social life, where every individual co-exist peacefully as brothers and sisters. All members of the community commit to protect each other and trees plays very important role in the community that provide for us and we in turn must protect and save them.

On 12th August 2011 , 92.7 BIG FM, Hyderabad's leading FM station in its continuous endeavors to create awareness on eco-friendly environment, today initiated a one-of-its-kind 'Tie-a-Rakhi-to-a-Tree, Make Hyderabad pollution free' campaign ahead of Raksha bandhan festival. The campaign was launched by renowned actress Saloni who is popularly known as 'Telugu Ammaiye' along with volunteers and environmental enthusiasts who marked the launch by performing puja, offering sweets and tying rakhi to saplings. The objective of the initiative is to communicate and build awareness on protecting our tree-brothers who are saplings now but eventually when they grow they will protect our future and make Hyderabad a greener and cleaner place to live.

"I firmly support BIG FM's initiative, we treat the trees like our brothers. As we tie Rakhi to our brothers expecting love, care, affection, safety and security throughout our life, the same way we should also think that the trees are also our brothers and will help protect our future" commented actress Saloni on the awareness drive.

Today when we talk about celebrating Raksha Bandhan in a new form, our main consideration should be safety of Universe above our family, society or nation. We all should take a resolution on this festival, that we should tie a thread of love around a tree and take the responsibility of its care. Worshiping of trees as of God contains the interest of human in itself. The nature which has been giving us from time immemorial selflessly. For their protection, something should be done on this day.

Trees and plants keep themselves favorable in all climatic conditions and without any discrimination they give life to human race. To save this earth, it is important to take the resolution of saving trees. Let us all take a promise of protecting a tree by tying a thread to Rakhi around it on Raksha Bandhan.

Suniti has received many national and international awards/honours like the National Stree Shakti Puruskar - 2002, Maharana Mewar Foundation Award-2005, Zee Astitva Award -2007, First Global Summit on Sustainable Development and Biodiversity [GLOSS] Award- 2008,

Godfrey Phillips Bravery Award -2010, the Aadhi Abadi Award 2011. She has been enlisted in Top Ten Indian Women Achievers 2007 by largest Hindi newspaper Dainik Bhaskar. In the First Global Summit on Sustainable Development and Biodiversity [GLOSS] 2008 the VRM Foundation [A Pioneer International Conservation Agency] Raipur has conferred her the “Best Conservationist of Chhattisgarh Award “for her spectacular contribution towards promoting grassroots’ movement on protection of natural heritage of Chhattisgarh on 9th February 2009. The Foundation valued this contribution towards understanding among conservationist, civil society organization and nature lovers of South Asia in particular and of the World in general.

The Tree Protection Festival has generated great environmental consciousness not only in Chhattisgarh but also in states like Madhya Pradesh, Orissa , Jharkhand, Bihar ,Uttar Pradesh, Utrakhand ,Delhi, Maharashtra, Rajasthan , Himachal Pradesh , Arunanhal Pradesh, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Union Territories’ like Chandigarh etc. Due to her tireless efforts the festival is also celebrated in countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Singapore and in New York state of USA. As it does not requires any expenditure, it is very popular programme among the Joint Forest Management (JFM) committees, eco clubs, self-help groups, NGOs, educational institutions. The Tree Protection Festival is right step in the right direction. So it should be celebrated every year because what it is trying to conserve is not merely few trees here & there but the entire life support system & with it, the option for human survival. For this mission Mrs. Yadav is popularly known as the Tree Woman of India for her environmental and social services

**Snapshots of Tree Protection Festival**



Mrs. Suniti Yadav tying *Rakhi* to a tree in front of Indian High Commission, Singapore on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2007



Celebration of Tree Protection Festival in Syracuse, New York State, USA in 2011:



Hon'ble C M Chattisgarh tying Rakhi to tree: Strengthening relation with mother Nature

**Women in PIPLANTRI Village of Rajasthan (India) celebrate Rakhi Festival in a unique way.**



World's largest Rakhi tied to Sal tree in Bhanupratappur [Bastar] during Rakhi Festival 2013



Largest Rakhi of the world 2007 [diameter 9 feet] tied to a V.I.P. Sal [*Shorea robusta*] Tree in Bastar [Chhattisgarh] by members of the Green Guardian Society on 8th August 2006

Glimpse of Tree Protection Festival in Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh 2009



Members of the Joint Forest Management Committees celebrating Tree protection festival in Kanger Valley National Park, Bastar to protect forest boundaries against encroachment.



Governor and the First Lady are tying sacred threads to tree on 15 August 2003



"Lets develop an emotional bond With trees." Chief Minister Dr. Raman Singh is tying Rakhi to a tree.

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