

‘ENVIRONMENT AND TRIBAL WOMEN’

- AN ECOFEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Throughout our history nature is portrayed as feminine and women are often thought of as closer to nature than men. Moreover, the consumerist world view growth-oriented economic paradigm helped people to view nature as resource of exploitation. Women, tribal and peasant societies embedded in nature are similarly unproductive, not because it has been demonstrated that in cooperation they produce less goods and services for needs, but because it is assumed that ‘production’ takes place only when mediated by technologies for commodity production, even when such technologies destroy life. Ecofeminist focus on these connections and analyses how they devalue and oppress both women and nature. In the light of above, following objectives are drawn:

- i. To focus ecofeminist perspective on women and nature.*
- ii. To unveil the relationship between tribal women and environment.*
- iii. To find out effects of western paradigm on tribal women and environment.*
- iv. To find out the role of tribal women in environment sustainability and protection.*

This paper is an analytical one and mainly secondary data are used for this study. The secondary data are collected from original writings of ecofeminist thinkers, books, articles, seminar papers, news reports published in different news papers related to this topic.

Keywords : Ecofeminism, Ecology, Tribal women, Development, Displacement

Understanding Ecofeminism :

Movements of all over the world that are dedicated to the continuation of life on earth, like the chipko movement in India, Anti-Militarist movement in Europe U.S.A,

movement against dumping of hazardous wastes in the US, and Green Belt movement in Kenya, are all labelled as ‘ecofeminist movements’. These movements attempt to demonstrate the resistance politics working at the micro-levels of power and point to the connection between women and nature. Ecofeminism emerged in the west as a product of peace, feminists and ecology movements of late 1970s and the early 1980s. The term ‘Ecofeminism’ was coined by the French writer Francoise d’ Eaubonne in 1974.

Recent works by feminists Susan Griffin (1978), Mary Daly (1978), Carolyn Merchant (1980), Ynestra King (1981), Ariel Kay Salleh (1984), Karen Warren (1987, 1990) Val Plumwood (1993) and other highlights the fact that ecology is a feminist issue. The connection between the oppression of women and oppression of nature are highlighted in order to understand ‘why the environment is a feminist issue’ as well as ‘why feminist issues can be addressed in terms of environmental concerns. (Gaard, 1993 p. 4). A notable ecofeminist in India is vandana shiva. She connects the nature with the traditional qualities of women and has described the nature as ‘Shakthi’.

Ecofeminism can be defined as a value system, a social movement, and a practice (which) also offers a political analysis that explores the link between androcentism and environmental destruction. It is an ‘awareness’ that begins with the realization that the exploitation of nature is intimately linked to ‘western Man’s’ attitude toward women and tribal cultures’ (Bikeland 1993, p. 18). Within the given patriarchal framework, all those attributes associated with masculinity are given higher status or prestige than those associated with feminity, resulting in ‘hierarchical dualism’ (Warren 1987, pp.6-8). All ecofeminists are of the view that it is the ‘logic of domination’ in association with value-hierarchical thinking and value-dualisms that sustains and justifies the twin domination of women and nature. For ecofeminists, therefore, the domination of women and nature is basically rooted in ideology. In order to overcome this one needs to reconstruct and reconceptualise the underlying patriarchal values and structural relations of one’s culture and promote equality, non-violence, non-hierarchical forms of organization to bring about new social forms. Ecofeminist theory has brought into sharp focus the links between development and

gender. It has highlighted the fact that the violence against nature and against women is built into the dominant development model.

CONNECTION BETWEEN ENVIRONMENT AND TRIBAL WOMEN

The ecological problem is integrally related to human life. Among human communities the tribal/indigenous people live very close to nature. The livelihood and cultural practices of tribals deeply depends on natural resources- environment the land, water, forest, livestock etc. Among the tribal communities, women play an integrative and important role in environmental, economic and social-cultural sustainability. *They are directly dependent on their immediate environments and their own skills in using it for the daily necessities of life.* They play a major role in managing natural resources and their daily tasks make them the daily manager of the living environment. Most women in tribal areas draw upon their traditional and often extensive knowledge of fauna and flora of their environment and recognize the importance of preservation of species and sustainable utilization of the components of their eco-system.

The forests are an important source of livelihood, particularly for tribal populations. The dependence of forest is much more during lean agricultural seasons and famines or droughts. While for a large percentage of tribal households, water is used directly from rivers and streams (Kulkarni, 1983). The dependence of forests, shortage of drinking water and so on, women have to spend more time and walk longer distances to get fuel, fodder, food and water (Bahuguna, 1984, Shiva, 1988).

They collect non-timber products as medicinal herbs, bamboo, fire wood, mango, jamun, the women obtain foods such as fruit and oil as medicines. Forest products also became raw materials for making a number of items for home and sold, such as bidi, brooms, baskets mats, rope, homemade toothbrushes and leaf plates. Tribal forest economy is primarily a women's economy, the females in tribal society play a crucial role in the economic activities particularly with reference to craft, forest based economy and cultivation they also protect the environment.

DEVELOPMENT, ECOLOGY AND TRIBAL WOMEN:

Development could not but entail destruction for women and nature and subjugated cultures, which is why throughout the Third World, women, peasants and

tribals are struggling for liberation from 'development' as they earlier struggled for liberation from colonialism. The development process displaced women basically tribal women from productive activity by the expansion of development was rooted largely in the manner in which development projects appropriated or destroyed the natural resource base for the production of sustenance and survival.

Natural forests remain unproductive till they are developed into monoculture plantations of commercial species. Development thus, is equivalent to maldevelopment, a development bereft of feminine, the conservation, the ecological principle. The neglect of nature's work in renewing herself, and women's work in producing sustenance in the form of basic, vital needs is an essential part of paradigm of maldevelopment, which sees all work that does not produce profits and capital as none or unproductive work.

The degradation of forests and the historical and ongoing malpractices and state policies and increasing privatization have restricted the access of tribal women to forests. It has reduced the number of items that women could gather from forests which has directly resulted in reduced incomes. The extra time spent in gathering has reduced the time available to women for crop production, where they are the main cultivators, as in the hill regions due to high male outmigration (Agrawal, 1992)

In Indian environment debate, the space vacated by forest has been quickly filled by major dams. Through the 1980s and beyond different river valley projects from Tehri in North to Silent valley in the South, Koel Karo in the East to Sardar Sarovar in the West, in North-east pagladiya Dam Project in Nalbari district of Lower Assam, the 200 MW Lower Subansiri Project on the border areas of Assam and Arunachal have been the subject of bitter controversy. The critics of multipurpose river valley projects have operated on several flanks. From economic perspective, they have argued that the cost-benefit ratios derived by government to justify various dams invariably overvalue benefits and undervalue costs. Using official data, they have also shown that siltation rates have usually been much higher than anticipated, thereby shortening life of reservoirs. From an ecological perspective, the high incidence of water logging and the wholesale submergence of forests and wildlife have been presented as examples of the unacceptable costs of dam building. The construction of large dams has also been shown to seriously disrupt fish life and led the spread of

water borne diseases (CSE, 1985, Kalpavriksh, 1988, Paranjpye, 1989, Sharma and Sharma, 1981 and for a global survey and critique, Goldsmith and Hildyard, 1984).

It has been estimated that in the last three decades, *more than 11.5 million people have been displaced by development projects in India* without being properly rehabilitated-and it is indisputable that major contributor to this process of forcibly uprooting people from their traditional homes (Fernandes and Ganguly-Thakural, 1988). The displacement of people due to large dams, or large scale deforestation, etc., has led to the disruption of social support networks within and between villages. Environmental degradation affects men and women in different ways such as:

- I. ***Increased work load of women***-women play a greater role in tasks like fetching water, gathering food, fuel and fodder etc.
- II. ***Increased inequalities between men and women***- the restriction on women like mobility, education and learning of new skills have resulted in lesser access to other employment opportunities of women.
- III. ***Subsistence***- as women are not provided with rights of land and ownership, they depend on village resources for subsistence.
- IV. ***Erosion of indigenous knowledge base of women***- women are known for their knowledge in medicinal plants, herbs, nutrition and other aspects of the nature but the commercialization and the environmental degradation has resulted in curbing to such knowledge.
- V. ***Greater insecurity of women***- environmental degradation has led to large scale displacement of communities destroying the social support networks on which poor tribal women rely for family subsistence and social security. *Moreover displacement is a traumatic experience.*

Caste, class, ethnicity, culture and time mediate gender relations. Not all women are homogeneous in nature and hence these factors also define their relationship with the natural resources. For example, tribal women may have more orientation with nature and may have more freedom in defining their roles while compared to urban women.

CHIPKO: ROLE OF WOMEN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

The *Chipko Movement* is known for its significant role of women and has been defined by ecofeminist as women led movement. In India there have lot of social movements like *Narmada Bacho Andolan* and the *Jhola Andolan* (fighting polythene) and there are lots of NGOs which work on the environmental protection and have realized the importance of women in environment. And chipko movement has acted as a base and pioneer for the other organizations in India.

Women's environmental action in India preceded the UN Women's Decade as well as the 1972 Stockholm Environment Conference. Three hundred years ago more than 300 members of Bishnoi community in Rajasthan, led by a woman called Amrita Devi, sacrificed their lives to save their sacred *khejri* trees by clinging to them. With the event begins the recorded history of Chipko (hug the trees). (R. S. Bishnoi 1987).

The chipko process as a resurgence of women power and ecological concern in the Garhwal Himalaya is a similar mosaic of many events and multiple actors. The significant catalysers of the transformations which made chipko resistance possible have been women like Mira Behn, Sarala Behn, Bimala Behn, Hima Devi, Gauri Devi, Gunga Devi, Bachni Devi, Itwari Devi, Chamun Devi and many others. The men of the movement like Sundarlal Bahuguna, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Ghanashyam Shailani, Dhoom Singh Negi have been their students and followers. Between Rishikesh and Hardwar she started a cattle centre called Pashulok, because cattle are central sustainable agriculture. Mira Behn also pointed out that the replacement of *banj* and mixed forests by commercially valuable pine was a major reason for increasing ecological instability of the Himalaya and the growing economic deprivation of Garwali women, since pine failed to perform any of the ecological and economic functions of *banj* (Vandana Shiva1989).

The early women's movement in Uttarakhand was an anti-alcohol movement aimed at controlling alcohol addiction among men who earned cash incomes from felling trees in one hand and lost the cash to liquor with the other. 1972 saw widespread, organized protests against the commercial exploitation of forests by outside contractors: in Purolia on December 11, in Uttarakashi on December 12, and in Gopeshwar on December 15. In 1977 in Advani when the chipko movement became explicitly an ecological and feminist movement, the Advani Satyagraha created new

directions for chipko. The movement's philosophy and politics now evolved to reflect the needs and knowledge of the women.

Like chipko movement, SAKTI (Search for Action and Knowledge for Tribal Initiative) is an organization and movement that has been working to protect the forests and tribal people of Andhra Pradesh for over 25 years. One of the first issues addressed by SAKTI was tribal land rights. Krishnaveni is one of the tribal women trained by SAKTI. She belongs to the Koya clan and is educated only till class v. But armed with skill of reading and interpreting land records she has confidence to question government officials like Mandal Revenue Officer and the District collector. She leads the fight by tribals in her village and a few neighbouring villages to regain land which was illegally usurped from their forefather around 1902.

Thus chipko movement is a pioneer of environmental movement in India. It has been described as the "invisible strength of women" that is the source for the success for the movement and its evolution for three decades. The famous ecological slogan created by Bachni Devi in the year 1977 emphasized the power and the role of women in the movement. The quote is – "what do the forests bear? soil, water and pure air".

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS:

From the above study we have come to know that ecofeminism refers to women's and feminist perspective on the environment- where the dominance and exploitation of women, of poorly resourced peoples and of nature is at the heart of the ecofeminist movement. Ecofeminist focus that western development paradigm cause environmental degradation on the one hand and affect the women basically tribal women on the other. The life of tribal women is so much interwind with the environment. Moreover the development causes displacement mostly tribal women. Development thus is equivalent to maldevelopment as it neglects of nature's work in renewing herself; and tribal women's work in producing sustenance as they are directly dependent on their immediate environment. The recent movements have shown that women are more sensitive to the earth's problems. The chipko movement has been described as the invisible strength of women that is the source of inspiration for all environmental movements.

Based on the study and conclusions arrived the following suggestions have been put forwarded for the reader's acceptance:

- ✓ Development is necessary but balance of nature is also must. As government is building dams in reservoir areas on the other hand lakhs of households are losing their entity and striving for rehabilitation. Further, a major portion of forest has been destroyed in almost every nook and corner of the India. Therefore, government should sense that the tribes are mostly dependent upon the disposal of these reserves for their live, as women use to do for her family. And forest departments should initiate adjacent or fresh reservoirs through seeding and planting edible and non-edible trees, bushes etc. in banjar lands.
- ✓ The study suggests that effort should be made to minimize the displacement as it resulting in impoverishment of project affected people.
- ✓ Compensation package should be provided to women and her household for their affects.
- ✓ As the development goes like this it will be a hardship business for tribal women to survive their family what they do as before. It means they should learn modern skills and ways of earning and hence feeding their family. Further, the male counterpart shall also have to take part in earnings. Therefore, the govt. and non-govt organisations should provide some vocational training and they are initially being financed through special subsidies or concessions also.
- ✓ Women have a vital role in environmental management and development. Their full participation therefore is essential in achieving sustainable development.
- ✓ Women should be more involved in environmental movement to make awareness about environmental degradation. As we cannot imagine an earth without nature and without women. Further, the role of the government, educational institutions, NGOs, mass media etc, should encourage people's movement.

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