

# **ECOFEMINISM : A STUDY ON INDIAN WOMEN'S DEDICATION TOWARDS THE ENVIRONMENT**

*Boro Jyoti Prasad*

&

*Robidas Mina*

*Deptt. of Sociology*

*Gargaon College, Simaluguri*

*Assam*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as myriad forms of feminist and environmental theories and activism intersected. The term was introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or Death) published in 1974. Some theorists, such as Ynestra King, name it as a third wave of feminism, while others place it in the general category of deep ecology. Ecofeminism acts in both and neither of these broad movements, simultaneously serving as an environmental critique of feminism and a feminist critique of environmentalism. Ecofeminist trajectories are varied; there is no one accepted or orthodox "ecofeminism."

Ecofeminism actually spread globally when women came out to protest following the Three Mile Island partial nuclear meltdown in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, the United States, in March 1979. Although the meltdown was declared to be of negligible effect, it triggered an anti-nuclear movement by activists, particularly women. Since then, it has assumed ideological connotations, a lot of which can be questioned on the basis of regional, caste, and class overtones which classical ecofeminism tends to overlook. Yet, the very fact that unlike other prevailing ideologies, ecofeminism neither does nor veer towards direct action, but instead calls for a nurturing inclusivity in caring for the environment and the ecosystem goes against it being accepted as an ideology by many.

Ecofeminism asserts that all forms of oppression are connected and that structures of oppression must be addressed in their totality. Oppression of the natural world and of women by patriarchal power structures must be examined together or neither can be confronted fully. These socially constructed oppressions formed out of the power dynamics of patriarchal systems. In

one of the first ecofeminist books, *New Woman/New Earth*, Ruether, makes clear a central tenet of ecofeminism: earth and the other-than-human experience the tyranny of patriarchy along with women. Classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, naturism (a term coined by Warren) and speciesism are all intertwined. In her introduction to *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, editor Warren asserts:

“What makes ecofeminism distinct is its insistence that nonhuman nature and naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nature) are feminist issues. Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques of social isms of domination to nature.”

Petra Kelly, in her foreword to *Healing the Wounds*, proclaims a “global ecological sisterhood” and calls on the women of the Chipko Movement (India), the Greenham Common (England), the Krim Region (former Soviet Union) and the Western Shoshone Indian Nation to “link arms” as global sisters.

## **Eco-feminism In India**

In India, eco-feminism, as per accepted norms, could be said to have made its first appearance with the Chipko Movement way back in 1974. This, however, is also contested by many, who see it as peasants' struggle, being led by a man named Sunderlal Bahuguna, Another man, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, raised awareness of the rights of the locals, and over a considerable period of time, the women of Uttarakhand played a very important role in organizing protests against the timber mafia which was laying the hills waste. The movement, which has since been linked to the history of peasant protests, was unique as it mainly involved women led by a local leader, Gaura Devi, of the Gram Mahila Mandal, who took up the cause of ecological balance and protection of forests in Uttarakhand, in the Carhwal-Himalayan region.

A historical event occurred on 26 March 1974, when Gaura Devi and a group of village women prevented the felling of trees in Reni village, Hemwalghati, in Chamoli district of present-day Uttarakhand. Through a four-day vigil that had them hugging the trees, these women prevented trees being felled by a contractor assigned by the State Forest Department for supplying wood to a sports goods manufacturer in Allahabad. The movement was meant to demand the restoration of their rights to their forests, and prevent rapid deforestation of the area which had to lack of firewood, water, and fodder. This had happened following the large number of civil engineering projects that were the cause of frequent floods and landslides in their region. Although it was a movement for livelihood, many see it as the precursor of ecofeminism in India as well as the developing world.

Similar was the cause of emergence of the Appiko Movement in Karnataka. The word Appiko means 'hug' in Kannada - was a response to the denudation of forests in the Uttar

Kannada district of Karnataka. The policy of the state government for setting up of hydro electric forests replacing mixed forests with eucalyptus plantations – and setting up of plywood industries since the 1950s had resulted in the drying of water resources and subsequent poverty. Under the leadership of Pandurang Hegde, the men, women, and children hugged the trees of Kalase forest in September 1983 to save them from being felled. The Appiko Movement laid the foundations of a movement to save the Western Ghats, and created awareness about the dangers of overexploitation of the fragile ecosystem. It further moved on to popularize fuel-efficient stoves, gohar gas plants, green energy, and organic agriculture to bring down firewood consumption and promote rational use of the ecosphere. The green movement initiated by Appiko has spawned similar initiatives in all the southern states as well as Maharashtra. Although led by a male, the Appiko Movement saw women play an active and indispensable role in saving the ecosystem, and could well be termed a movement in the realm of ecofeminism.

In south, C K Janu, a marginally literate woman, who had some initial exposure to Leftist politics as a member of the CPM in her younger days, fought and secured adivasi rights to the forest around 2001-03. The forest-dwelling tribes of the Muthanga Forest were evicted when a sanctuary was set up in the 1960s. Deprived of their traditional livelihoods, without any land or compensation being given for their rehabilitation, the tribals were faced with starvation deaths in 2001. This was when C K Janu and Geethanandan organized a 48-hour sit-in strike in front of the state secretariat in Thiruvanthapuram. When this did not yield any result, she had her adivasi brethren forcibly set up huts in Muthanga. Police repression and violence resulted in the death and serious injury of several adivasis. Their huts were set ablaze, and drunken elephants were set on them. Janu and Geethanandan were jailed, but the adverse publicity created quite a stir, making the government relent the adivasis were given land and set up in a co-operative farm.

Belonging to the Ravula or Adiya meaning slave in Malayalam - tribe, Janu had only a little political experience with the CPM. She had left the party since she realized that there was no interest in the well-being of Dalits and adivasis on the part of the political leaders. Whatever she achieved was out of what she experienced as an adivasi the socialist ideology could be taken to have influenced her, but she always steered clear of abstract political dogmas. As an organic leader of the adivasis, pragmatic considerations of livelihood and survival had driven her ahead. Celebrated as 'Mother Forest' by many, Janu, we can rightly say, is a reluctant, though successful ecofeminist.

There has been a similar movement by Dalit women in the Medak district of Andhra Pradesh. Similar to the Chipko Movement, this movement was initiated by a man, Dr P V Satheesh, and his friends in academia. The local women of the region cultivated the land and knew the shortcomings in it. With the help of Dr Satheesh, the women formed a cooperative, and addressed their financial deprivation to cultivate their infertile wastelands which were tough to work on. Rather than growing rice or wheat, they took to growing millets, and became self-sufficient in meeting their needs.

Today, the Deccan Development Society which these women have built, runs a seed bank, a community radio to address their farming needs, and runs a rationing system where millets are distributed in lieu of cash in keeping with a villager's financial means. The old, destitute, and infirm in the village distributed millets free of cost. None of these home-grown ecofeminists mentioned knew anything about political dogmas and ideology. Their thoughts, words, and deeds were influenced by the large-scale exploitation and deprivation that they saw all around them. By organizing themselves, they tried to fight injustice, and ensure a life of dignity for the community.

### **Schools of Eco-feminist Thought**

It is not correct to say that ideology does not play a role in India. Academic scholars and activists have tried to articulate the guiding ideology behind this fight for justice. At the moment, there are two major streams of ecofeminist thought. One is the socialist school, presided over by Vandana Shiva and Martha Mies, which looks at the exploitation of the environment as something inevitable in the prevalent Capitalist-Colonial global patriarchal system. Vandana Shiva had been a participant in the Chipko Movement of the 1970s, and has been particular about emphasizing the connection of women with the environment owing to their daily interactions, particularly in subsistence economies. These women have always produced wealth in partnership with nature, and are repositories of knowledge relating to the ecosystem. The modern patriarchal mind-set ignores these women, and is dismissive of such knowledge, much to the detriment of all mankind. The other school of ecofeminism in India is represented by Bina Agarwal's more inclusive 'feminist environmental' perspective.

The ideology of Vandana Shiva, Mahashweta Devi, and Medha Patkar draws on the socialist-school of thought. Vandana Shiva, a physicist and environmental researcher/activist in India, published *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988), which reflects the increasingly global nature of ecofeminism during the 1980s. Shiva connects the "death of the feminine principle" with "maldevelopment," a term she uses to describe the introduction of Western, intensive agriculture to the "Third World." If Vandana Shiva has articulated her concerns for the earth, and spawned the organic movement that has found expression through her Navadanya project, Mahashweta Devi has used her literary works to expose the system that has refused to deliver justice, and the chinks in a development paradigm that have by passed the forest dwellers of the tribal belt of undivided Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal. Her writings are a disturbing manifestation of the poverty of deprivation these regions spell out for any visitor.

As an academician, writer, and journalist, Mahashweta Devi was strongly influenced by the Leftist movement. Her travels to the interiors of India exposed her to the terrible exploitation of bonded labour and tribals. She has been working for change through her literary works, and a journal *Bortika* (The Lamp) which she has been running for more than 20 years. The journal publishes pieces written by tribals. Recently, she took the lead in organizing protests against the

West Bengal (CPM) government policy of taking over fertile farmland and handing them over to industrial houses. This was in line with her espousal of the cause of the underprivileged since several decades.

Her works such as *Aranyer adhikar* (Rights to the forest), *Chhoto Munda o tar tir* (little Munda and his arrow) display a deep maternal instinct, and reflect a desire to nurture and protect the forest peoples of India. This is ecofeminism all right, with socialist leanings. Medha Patkar has also organized her work against the policy of repeated governments to seize lands of the voiceless forest dwellers in the name of common good, without making any provisions for rehabilitation or compensation of the deprived. In their different ways, all three women have tried to find solutions to the degradation of the earth Mother, while trying to articulate a strong protest.

The other school of ecofeminism in India is the one represented by Bina Agarwal and Meera Nanda, which refers to a more inclusive ecological feminism. Bina Agarwal has been particularly critical of the biases in the collection of national-level statistics, and hence the framing of policies. Although the Constitution promises no discrimination on the basis of sex as a fundamental right, most inheritance and ceiling provisions in the country continue to be highly gender discriminatory. Women, according to her, are undercounted, resulting in policies that impinge directly and crucially on women's legal and economic status. Meera Nanda has been particularly critical of the class, caste, and other factors which markedly affect the status of women in accessing the resources at their disposal. She has been vociferous in demanding more inclusivity in developmental policies, for the betterment of women and the ecosystem that they must depend on for their livelihoods.

To understand the two major schools of eco-feminist thought, we need to accept the kaleidoscopic nature of the Indian environmental movement, which, to use Ramchandra Guha's classification, can be considered to comprise Crusading Gandhian, Ecological Marxist, Appropriate Technology and, more recently, Scientific Conservation and Wilderness Enthusiasts. Common to all these streams is the acknowledgement of the failure of the present development model. Some of these believe in a radical break from tradition, while others advocate a return to the Gandhian, pre-industrial utopia. Few are, of course, pragmatic enough to advocate the best of the traditional and modern.

While it is true that Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, and Bina Agarwal have had some familiarity with the realities of the Indian situation, but the ideology they espouse is too urban-centric to explain the difficult realities that govern the situation in rural India. The pragmatic women who led movements in the far corners of this vast country had realized this long ago and hence, even when familiar with dogma, they have discarded them as of little use.

An ideological straitjacket cannot fit the reality of class and caste differences, or explain the nuances of inequality and patriarchy that shackle our women, and prevent them from

accessing the means to create wealth. Ecofeminism will need a new construct to explain the Indian reality. Only then can we forge a 'feminism' that can keep up with our ecological movement/s.

### **Criticism:**

Ecofeminism has not been without critics, from ecofeminists themselves as well as from others. Because of the strong woman-nature connection assumed and developed in some ecofeminist positions, various feminists distance themselves from ecofeminism and suggest that it is essentialist in nature. Essentialism claims that cross-culturally and cross-historically those of a particular race, gender or other category share the same traits. Many expressions of feminism and ecofeminism argue against all such essentialist constructions, while others expressions seem to maintain essentialism. Kate Nash, in her 1994 essay "The Feminist Production of Knowledge: Is Deconstruction a Practice for Women?" published in *Feminist Review*, clarifies the "tension" between the "deconstructive politics of feminism and the assertions, or constructions of unified identity that feminists are frequently called on to make on behalf of the category 'women' which gives the project its political specificity" (75-76).

Deep ecology and ecofeminism also engage in ideological debates. Many ecofeminists count themselves as deep ecologists and many deep ecologists count themselves as ecofeminists, while others might designate themselves as one but not the other. The background to the differences between some deep ecologists and some ecofeminists grew from the feminist critique of the androcentric (male-centered) tendency of deep ecology in its earliest, and often militaristic or violent, expressions.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus we can see that ecofeminism is on rise in India too. It better sign of womanhood to claim their position male dominated society as like in India. As ecofeminism continues to shift and grow, different positions will surely form and surface, while other positions and alliances will fade away or be replaced by more urgent connections. Diverse understandings regarding the nature of the web of relationships between various spiritual/religious traditions and ecofeminism could persist. Ecofeminism and deep ecology may continue its debate. Issues of racism, population growth and the valuing of some humans over others, or of all humans over other-than-human animals, will stir the thoughts and actions of ecofeminists on a global scale. Another area of ecofeminism that needs to be addressed is the connection with animal rights activism. The explicit links between androcentric, patriarchal treatment of other-than-human animals, particularly focusing on the meat producing industries and the exploitation of women. Another prominent author, Mary Stange referred to herself as an ecofeminist, in her books, *Woman the Hunter and Gun Women*, posit that women are natural hunters, therefore in a predatory relationship with animals. Stange suggests that the linkages between woman and other animals sometimes made by ecofeminists could justify continued essentialism and, therefore, continued domination of both women and other animals. Thus she claims that the woman-animal connection should be reevaluated.

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