

Ecological Consciousness of Women of Uttarakhand

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Abstract

The process of development in Uttarakhand over the years have neglected both ecology and women of the hilly region. The women of Uttarakhand play an important role in various activities relating to natural resources and consequent degradation of ecology and environment has adverse effect on these women's lives. These rural women depend on the forest and other natural resources for their sustenance and livelihood. The degradation of environment /ecology adversely affects the lives of poor peasant women of Uttarakhand. Therefore, it can be inferred that 'environmental issues and women's issues are inseparable'. The close association between women and natural resources makes them better managers of natural resources and responsible for their actions regarding ecological consequences.

Keywords: Ecology, Chipko, Eco-feminism, Maiti, Ecological consciousness, Indigenous Knowledge.

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“With the destruction of forests, water and land, we are losing our life support system. This destruction is taking place in the name of ‘development’ and ‘progress’, but there must be something seriously wrong with a concept of progress that threatens survival itself. The violence to nature which seems intrinsic to the dominant development model is also associated with violence to women who depend on nature for drawing sustenance for themselves, their families and their societies”(Shiva. 1988). Rural women of Kumaun hills of Uttarakhand are still embedded in nature, experience very closely the ecological destruction in their surroundings and its causes, and then with their limited resources have conceived and initiated the process to minimize and arrest the destruction of nature. The women of Kumaun hills closely interact with forest and other natural resources for drawing sustenance, and it is fairly well established fact that it has its disproportionate effect on them. This article is an attempt to look at how women’s close encounter with surrounding environment affects their consciousness of ecological issues and their effort in conservation and management of natural resources

Methodology

The fieldwork for this study was carried out in Maram and Nanoli two villages of Dhauladevi block of Almora district. In-depth interviews and observation techniques were used for the collection of qualitative data. Eco-feminism perspective has been used to understand the close relationship between women and the ecology.

Women, Forest and Ecology:

The forest constitutes the most important natural resources in the villages of Maram and Nanoli. They form an ecosystem, and the protection of forest has remarkable contribution in the process of economic development and ecological balance. Besides their protective functions, they constitute natural biosphere reserves. They are sources of fuel, fodder, food, timber and are crucial in maintaining ecological stability. Other important forest products are timber for construction, sport goods, raw material for paper and pulp industry, resin and turpentine, medicine and herbs.

Agriculture, the mainstay of the area, is practised on carefully made terrace fields. A study (Singh, Pande & Tiwari, 1984) conducted in the villages of Kumaun hills concludes that forests and agricultural fields form a combined agro-ecosystem, and human beings are crucially dependent on each of its components.

Women are more dependent on forests and the surrounding resource-base for survival. Women of the villages of Maram and Nanoli are primarily responsible for the gathering of fuel wood, fodder, wild foods and the growing subsistence crop for survival. Women have traditionally engaged in integrated forests with food

production and animal husbandry . Thus, it is implied that women have a ‘special’ connection with forests. Bina Agarwal (1981) believes that census data on female work participation may be reflecting the real level of women’s involvement in non-domestic work more in the hills than in the plains. The 2011 census shows that the proportion of women in work-force is high in most mountainous areas. Female work participation rates in the hill districts is higher than in the plain districts, where 96 to 98 percent female workers are cultivators who do everything on the farm except ploughing. In all these areas, collecting fuel, fodder and water also takes an enormous time.

“In Kumaun hills, the present management of forests has historically been affected by British colonial interests and the demands of development in Independent India”(Guha,1989). In Kumaun hills, since time immemorial forests belonged to the people. These forests were controlled, preserved and protected by the village communities.

The commercial and industrial interests in the forests lured the successive governments of independent India, and they started ruthless exploitation of forest resources which is still unchecked and unabated. The Forest Conservation Act of 1980 restricted the poor women’s access to forest produce. Later on, the National Forest Policy 1988 has well emphasized the importance of the people’s involvement in the development and protection of forest.

CHIPKO: The Ecological Movement

The Chipko movement emerged in the hills of Uttarakhand in 1973-74 against forest destruction and commercial forestry. The movement, which originated from narrow economic issues developed into a wider movement with worldwide recognition for environmental and developmental issues .

Women have been involved in the Chipko movement from its inception. In 1974, an illiterate women, Gaura Devi, along with other illiterate woman of the village of Reni(Chamoli district) forced the contractor to retreat. The participation of women in the Chipko and its associated movements has been influenced by the detrimental effects of commercial use of forest produce as well as their traditional dependence on the natural environment.

An excellent example of women’s protest comes from Khirakot, in Almora district where its women protested against mining near the surrounding panchayat forest. “Even under serious threats by the contractors, the women brought them to court. The mines were officially closed”(CSE,1985). The women of the Kumaun hills not only actively took part in the anti-deforestation movement, but actively

participated in the anti-alcohol movement (Pathak, 1985). They were also the backbone of the statehood movement for Uttarakhand.

Maiti

Maiti, a women centric movement of Uttarakhand for eco-conservation, is an example of afforestation and forest conservation like its predecessor Chipko movement. *Maiti* is spearheading the campaign for afforestation in view of steady eco-degradation in the Himalayan belt.

The word *maiti* in Uttarakhand stands for parental home of the married girl. Each married village girl has emotional bondage not only with her near and dear ones but also with plants and trees within her household. When her marriage is solemnized, trees are planted in the village to mark that auspicious occasion. The newly wedded couple plants saplings with the help of girls' family members and friends as part of the programme. The bride presents the sapling to her bridegroom to plant it while she pours water from the above. Rest of the girls also plant saplings likewise. Bride's friends are thereafter given gifts by bridegroom. The responsibility of looking after the plants thereafter rests with the '*maiti*girls' (friends of bride in the village).

The eco-feminist discourse supports women's involvement in the initiatives that involve women to save environment because of their apparent 'closeness to nature'. It is felt that, "this closeness gives them a special stake in environmental protection and conservation" (Shiva, 1988). The second school of thought traces the need for women's involvement to their dependence on the resources for survival. It has been observed during the field work in the villages of Maram and Nanoli that women being most dependent upon forest for subsistence are sensitive to ecologically sustainable development needs. Women in the hills say: "When we were young, we used to go to the forest early in the morning without eating anything. There we would eat plenty of berries and wild fruits — drink the cold water of the *banj*(oak) roots.... In a short while we would gather all the fodder and firewood needed, rest under the shade of some huge tree and then go home. Now with the going of the trees everything else has gone too" (Bahuguna, 1997).

Gender relations have also been affected by the ecological crisis. All the schemes of state government have failed to check the male migration from hills to plains as men continue to migrate to the plains to find work, thereby placing the entire responsibility for the maintenance of the household and agriculture on women. Monetary benefits make men more supportive of cash crops, development projects and the 'money-order economy' than women are.

Ecological Consciousness And Indigenous Knowledge of Women:

In the villages of Maram and Nanoli, 95 percent of the women interviewed criticized chirpine plantation and were in favour of *banj* (Himalayan oak). Most of them held *chirpine* plantation responsible for the drying of *naulas*. According to Neema (21):

“Our naulas are drying up. No more they provide us sufficient water during the summer because of deforestation, cutting of banj trees from the surrounding area”.

These rural women were also critical of deforestation as this has led to reduced availability of various forest produces such as fuel wood, fodder and fruits. Another woman Uma (27) adds:

“Deforestation has reduced availability of fuelwood and other forest produce. Now women are forced to undertake a long journey to collect these household requirements. Our surrounding forest no more provides us fuelwood and fodder.”

Majority of women were aware of their physical drudgery because of deforestation and reduced availability of biomass from the surrounding forests. According to Nirmala (31):

“The forest gives us fresh air and breeze. But these forests will not survive anymore. We must plant trees. We must only cut the twigs and branches. We must plant trees like banj, kharik, pain, bhekua.”

Another women Hema (49) adds :

“We are dependent on forests for fruits and medicines (herbs) also, but vanishing forests have reduced the availability of fruits and herbs. We must be careful while grazing animals and cutting branches that no tree should be harmed.”

It shows that rural women of Kumaon have an interest in preventing further degradation of forests, reviving the lost forest and in consuming forest resources in balanced and sustainable manner. According to Shiva, in forestry too, women’s knowledge is crucial for the use of biomass and fertilizers. It has also been observed during the field work that women in villages used various forest produce for medicinal use and others as eatable fruits and vegetables like *kafal*, *hisalu*, *kilmaora*, *ghingararu*, *malu*, *bedu*, *timil*, *mehal*, *tarur*, *gethi*, *pangar*, *kachnar*, *timur*, *guchchi*, *chyyur*, *burans* (flowers) are collected by women, which have good nutritive value.

The folk song widely sung by the women during work in the villages clearly

demonstrate the women's closeness, caring and love for trees and forests. F.G. Bailey in this context suggests the "significance of exploring and understanding the knowledge that peasant women have, the value they held, the way they see the world and society around them (Bailey,1971). The dominant constituent of knowledge and awareness prevailing at the level of peasant women is 'localized knowledge'(Robb,1996) of which folksongs are a significant part. The folk song, therefore, also help in understanding, at least, how these women construct the social reality. These village women relate to the surrounding forest as a bundle of significations. For them, the forests are important source of livelihood and economic space. The women, for instance, have constructed a poetic dialogue illustrating the difference between their own perspective and that of the foresters.

Foresters	:	<i>What does the forest bear?</i> <i>Profits, resin and timber.</i>
Women (Chorus)		<i>What does the forest bear ?</i> <i>Soil, Water and Pure air</i> <i>Soil, Water and Pure air</i> <i>Sustain the earth and all She bears.</i>

In other words, the women recognize that forests cannot be reduced merely to trees and the trees to wood for commercial use, and that vegetation, soil and water form part of a complex and inter related eco-system. This inter-relatedness and inter- dependence between the various and human sustenance is critical for material components of nature and between nature evolving a strategy of sustainable environmental protection and regeneration.

Another folk song, widely used by the women activists of Uttarakhand SangharshVahini in the heyday of the Chipko movement, and later during the statehood movement testifies their concern for forest protection.

Today the Himalaya is calling you, wake-up²O'my son!
Don't auction us, don't slaughter us
O human race! listen, please listen to a tree's agony.

Another folk song also warns the contractors of felling trees:

"Contractors do not take contract, your skull will be broken
Masses will rise and you will not be able to find the pieces of your body
Sister will save the trees and brothers will save the forest
These forests are our homes, where our minds and hearts lie
For Shiva, India is *aranyasanskriti* or a forest culture, and its forest-based

settlements produced the best scientific research and cultural writings. The folk songs also exhibit the cultural value of the forests. Forests are also cultural or symbolic space. The following folk song proves this:

*“O my dear sister, listen the melodious sound of the wind
The forest wind from the Oak grove is blowing.”*

Another folk song testifies the same:

*“Come arise, my brothers and sisters,
Save this mountain.....
Come plant new trees, new forests,
Decorate the earth”*

Women’s ecological consciousness and conservative approach is vividly expressed in the following song:

*“Don’t cut don’t cut the dense grove of oak trees,
They are good source of cold water.”*

Another song exhibiting the same emotions:

*“These Oak trees
save and worship them,
because
their roots store water,
their leaves have milk and fodder,
the breeze blows cool
over the beautiful rhododendron flower*

Above analysis clearly indicates that, the rural women of Kumaun hills are aware of ecological issues like mono-culture plantation, deforestation and development. These women value the environment in which they live, and would like to sustain the natural resources because of their continuous interaction with environment in terms of what the environment gives them like fresh air, fodder, fuel wood, fruits, food, timber, shade and so on. For these rural women, the forest is not simply an economic space, rather it is more. The forest for them is cultural or symbolic as well as recreational space.

Women’s role in the Chipko and the anti-alcohol movements in spreading environmental awareness can not be overlooked as it took the ecological issues to the remote part of the hills. Women’s active participation in large numbers is clearly indicative and further testifies women’s closeness to nature and their ecological

consciousness. This reinforces Venkateswaran's (1995) observation that ecological consciousness, primarily in rural context and especially among the women of less affluent families, exists because of their social and economic roles which leads them to interact extensively with natural resources for survival.

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