

Women Empowerment and Eco-Feminism in Bihar Perspective

Abstract

Eco-feminism describes movement and Philosophies that link feminism with ecology. Ecofeminism grew from the idea that women's ethic are closer and in sync with the nature than a man. Eco-feminism connects the exploitation and domination of women with that of the environment and argue that there is a connection between women and nature that also comes from their shared history of oppression. Another aspects of ecofeminism is that for the most part, world environmental problem generally disproportionately effect women. Women's work including the critical role they play in livelihood activities is often linked to the environment through subsistence agriculture, domestic chores and hired work such as sowing, weeding and much of this work is made harder through environmental degradation. It also affect the daily lives and livelihood of women.

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Introduction

A new insight provided by rural women in third world is that women and nature are associated not in passivity but in creativity and maintenance of life. The recent surge in women's involvement in collective struggle over natural resources is contributing to a redefinition of their identities and the relation between the gender and nature. In developing countries like India the new perspective of ecofeminism is rooted in material reality. Traditional view of eco-feminism talked about connectedness of nature with women but has not questioned the main issue of control over the natural resources. Cultivated land, forest are water and the most common form of property in rural India. Women's control over natural resources can be crucial for enhancing their well being, their bargaining power within and outside the household. In India gender resistance to equality in access, control decision making with regard to natural resources has led to their participation in the ecological movement, which aim their inclusion in the system and empowerment.

Overview

Eco-feminism emerged in the west as a product of feminism and ecological movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The term eco-feminism was coined in 1974 by French writer Francois d' Eaubonne, who called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to , save the planet. It was further developed by Ynestra King in about 1976 and become a movement in 1980, with the organisation in the same year, of the first eco-feminist conference- "Women and Life on Earth ;

Eco-feminism in 80s." at Amherst, Massachusetts, U.S.A. The conference explored the connections between women and nature. In this conference liberal, cultural, social and socialist feminism have all been concerned with improving the relationship between human and nature and each has contributed to an eco-feminist perspective in different ways. According to Charlene Spertnak : 'Ecofeminism grew out of radical or cultural feminism, which hold that identifying the dynamics behind the dominance of male over female in the key to comprehending every expression of patriarchal culture with it hierarchical, militaristic, mechanistic and industrialist form.

Eco-feminism offers a way or thinking and organising ourselves by encouraging inter connectedness with our environment and subjugation of women to a common goal of restoring the quality of the natural environment and for people and other living and non living inhabitants of the planet. As a result a large body of literature on eco-feminism reflect the different ways of analysing the connection between women and nature as well as the difference of nature of women's oppression and solutions to them. Some feminist scholars have categorised eco-feminist theory into liberal, radical or cultural and socialist eco-feminism.

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Liberal feminism is consistent with the objectives of reform environmentalism; to alter human relation through the passage of new laws and regulations, while radicals or cultural eco-feminist analyzed environmental problem from within their critique of patriarchy and offered alternatives that could liberate both women and nature. They hold that the women are closer to the nature than men because of their physiology and social role. Cultural eco-feminist celebrate the relationship between women and nature through the popularization of ancient rituals centred on the goddess worship the moon and the female reproductive system. For these feminist ecologist Earth's house and human house are habkats to be cherished.

In contrast to cultural eco-feminism, the socialist stands of eco-feminism treat nature and human nature as socially constructed and subject to analysis in terms of race, class and gender. However, there are disagreement about the nature of the women-nature connection and oppression. These variety of eco-feminist encompasses a wide range of environmental and social issue.

In India the most visible advocate of eco-feminism is Vandana Shiva. She critiques modern science and technology as a western, patriarchal and colonial project which is inherently violent and perpetuate this violence against women and nature. According to her, women special knowledge of nature and their dependence on it for 'staying alive' were systematically marginalized under the onslaught of modern science- Shiva and Mies refers to western eco-feminism as 'catch up* feminism, where women try to uplift their status to that of men by taking on male roles and responsibilities. Instead Shiva argues that women possess the power for change as feminism qualities such as love and compassion. Gender Empowerment and Eco-feminism Women's participation in movements in India goes well into India's past. In the first phase of their movement in pre-independence era, women were mainly involved with National liberation struggle. Women's organisation focused on constitutional equality and amendment of Hindu laws. After the independence in the mid 1960s and early 1970s, Indian women were actively participated in Naxalbari movement and some regional tribal revolts against the lopsided development policies of the state. 1970s decade brought a second phase of feminism in Western countries which created a gender consciousness all over the world. In India to the 1970s onward witnessed a strong wave of the women movement. Some of the major debate that engaged in the women's movement in India were issue of women's oppression, violence against women, unequal access to resources enjoyed by men and women. During this period a number of autonomous women's group emerged that questioned the development plan and policies of the govt. and put forward gender equality as an operative principle, but environmental concern have not been issue for theoretical debate within the Indian women's movement.

Issue of environment and ecology entered the mainstream discourse on development and social

movements after the conference an Environment and Development at Stockholm in 1972. However, in the third world ecological movement was launched as the participating people are concerned with the problem of survival, security, livelihood, equality and distributing justice on critical life issues. The Indian environmental movement also represent a wide spectrum of social conflicts on dwindling natural resources. Chipko Andolan, Narmada Bachao Andolan, opposition of Tihari, Koelkaro and subarnrekha Dams, Chilka lake and Coastal people movements and Singur movement are considers as ecological movement. It mainly concerned with the activity that impoverish local communities, dislocations, depletion of fish and destruction of forest. The root of the contest is the conflict of interest between subsistence oriented peasants tribals and fishermen on the one hand and urban centres, industry on the other hand. Most of these movement were more a defensive movement and came from those directly affected such as tribal's, peasants and women have actively participated in most of there movements but the reason behind women participation was more economic than ecological. Indian feminist environmentalist critique the state and globalized model of economic growth that disempower poor women's live in the name of development. Women empowerment and ecofeminism in India must be analysed in the context of material reality, property, power and their right on the natural resources.

In this context I have discussed BodhGaya land movement and Ganga Mukti Andolan as example of women empowerment and eco-feminism and try to discuss how the increased involvement of women in these movements leading to a sense of agency and empowerment and ultimately gave boost to eco-feminism.

The Bodhgaya Movement

The BodhGaya movement initiated in 1975 in the Gaya district of Bihar was a struggle for land rights by dalits (scheduled caste), landless labourers and share croppers to gain right in land which they have cultivated for decades.

The land about 10,000 acres spread over 138 villages was held by a Muth (Manastry cum temple complex) in violation of the land ceiling act. The Muth was built by Gosain Ghamandi Giri in 1590 A.D. The Muth began to grow during his successor Mahanth Lala Giri who acquired vast land which was given to him as grant by Mughal emperor of Delhi. Over the period Muth developed into feudal organisation where men and women were exploited. There is a history of struggle against the exploitive rule of the Mahanth of BodhGaya led by the Congress, Communists, Sarvodaya groups and the Naxalites.

The agitation was launched by Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, a socialist organization of Youths founded by Jayprakash Narayan. Women were participated in this movement through its inception. The movement lasted several years. Its Primary slogan was 'Jo Zameen Ko jote bove, voh zameen ka malik hai' (Those who sow arid plough the land was the owner of the land).

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Gender Inclusion

In 1980 the activist decided to seize the land and cultivate it independently of the Math. About 3000 acres were captured and ploughed. Despite police attacks sowing was completed. At the harvest time the attacks were renewed by the laithaits (musclemen) of Mahanth with burnt of crops. I met with Jagdeo Singh a senior activist who informs me that since women usually harvested the crops it was they who face the burnt. Initially they came forward unitedly to save their menfolk, as the repression intensified, women's involvement increased.

They began participating in equal number with men and also courting arrest with accompanying children. Women also organized Shivirs (camp) to discuss their concern within the struggle. In these camps a large number of questions about power structure was raised, which included, many about women-questions about family, work distribution, and family violence, unequal access to resources enjoyed by Gender Empowerment and Eco-feminism men and women, issues of male female relationship and women's sexuality. From this movement a powerful critic of patriarchy emerged. In a camp at Shekhwara village at BodhGaya 65 women participated and a resolution was passed in which it was acknowledged that without the support of women, no change could be accomplished either, at home, in family or in society. They decided to get organized and fight against atrocities both in the house and outside in peaceful manner. They also presented a memorandum to the representative of Mahanth.

Finally in 1981, the government identified 1000 acres of the Math's land for redistribution to the agitating farmers. The Vahini drew up a list giving priority to landless labourers, the disabled, widows and small peasants. Women other than widow did not figure in the list. They protested against their exclusion, 'We were in the forefront of the fight, carrying out children in our women and in our arms; we went to jail and faced the lathis (sticks), we also did all the house work but when the land was distributed, were pushed back, we did not even come to know by what rules the land was distributed'.

Assertive Women

In making their claims, women had to encounter multiple tiers of resistance from husband, from the Vahini activists and from govt. officials. They successfully fought at all the three levels. First of all their men argued, 'what difference does it make in whose name the land is registered'. The women responded 'If it does not make a difference than put it down in the women's name, why argue about it'. There mood was reflected in the slogan.

"Brabar Ki Bhagidar Barabar Ki Larai", when the men asked 'How did you cultivate the land and who will plough it for you. They replied' we will ready to cultivate the land with hoes instead of plough but we want it in our names". Women were confident because they have been involved in most of the agricultural activities like sowing, transplanting, harvesting and weeding.

Women Empowerment and Ecu -feminism

After a prolonged debate on why women should have independent land right. In 1982 it was

decided that women too would received land in their own names in future distribution. In two villages the villagers unanimously approved list for giving land rights only to women and widowers. Despite list with the name of women drawn for several villages, the local government functionaries refused to give them the title on pretext that they were not the head of the household. The villagers, however, refused to take any land unless it was given to women⁴. After some time all the Muth's illegal holding were distributed and women received land in various ways, individuals title, joint titles and as widows. When women got titles they graphically described their feeling of being empowered; 'We had tongues but could not speak, we had feet but could not walk. Now that we have the land we have the strength to speak and walk'. It is noteworthy that a largely illiterate group of peasant women discussed at length on the question of patriarchy and social power structure where they found that control of land is essential not only for their empowerment but well being of society and environment at large. This struggle provide a powerful model for many future struggles.

In the course of my research I made a visit to some villages of Bodh-Gaya where women received land rights. I had interacted with some men and women. Jagdeo Singh, a Vahini activist of Shekhwara and Fulwa Devi of Visa informed me that endowing women with land not only empower them economically but they feel a deep sentimental attachment with land and environment. They invest most of their time in nurturing and improving their own land and produce. They take care of manure collection and its application to soil fertility management. After some time the yield of paddy was increased from maund a bigha to 30 maund a bigha. Besides this they played important role in participatory management systems initiated for the sustainable management of watersheds, irrigation, grazing ground and environment.

Ganga Mukti Andolan

Ganga Mukti Andolan has its origin in resistance against the exploitive Panidari system (waterlordism), which gave zamindars (Landlords) exclusive rights to fish and runboats over an 80km stretch of the Ganges, from Sultanganj to Pripainti in Bhagalpur district of Bihar. The Panidari system (water lordism) or Jalkar rights in Ganga has flourished from the times of Mughals, and it continued even after Zaminadri was abolished in 1954 in the rest of the country.

Person holding rights on fishing, arrangement of Ghats and navigational activities were known as Jalkar Zamindars or Panidars. Mahesh Ghosh and Musarraff Hussain Paramanik were the Zamindars, who had control over the 80 km. Stretch of the Ganga from Sultanganj to Pripainti. The stretch was divided into two stripes-each under one Zamindar. They granted fishing right to contractor by auction. The rate of auction was often exorbitantly raised through unfair practices.

Contractor leaved out the river to individual fish workers collecting Rs. 700 to Rs. 2000 from each person annually.

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A constant control was exercised upon them by waterlords and their contractors. Besides many of the criminal gangs also extract money from the fisher folk. There was lot of violence, murder and litigation in the fishing business. The terror of Panidars, contractors and their musclemen went unchallenged till the beginning of 1980's, not even the affected fishermen had objected to it till the time the catch was sufficient. Gender Empowerment and Eco-feminism-Development project like Farraka barrage, Farraka Hydro Electric Project, National Thermal Power Project (NTPC) at Kahelgaon, MC Dowell company in Ganga Farraka Basin has resulted in large scale displacement and loss of livelihood of people living in the Gangatic Farraka Basin. These project are on obstacle to the natural flow of the river which resulted in diversion of the rive path and cutting of the land besides the river. Thousands of acres of charland (low land besides the river) that was previously used as cultivated land remain flooded throughout the year. Almost 45 to 50 villages have been swallowed up in by the river Ganga due to changing its course. Fishermen had also lost their livelihood due to destruction of the river micro ecosystem and depletion of the fish in the river.

The agitation was launched by Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini in 1980 and by Ganga Mukti Andolan and Jal Shramik Sangh. Ganga Mukti Andolan was organised by fisherfolk communitiy and boat person for raising the issue of depleting population of the fish in the Ganges. GMA also began to involve the farmers in their struggle as the mismanagement of the riverine project was throwing challenge on the peasantry. Environmental struggle though mostly localized and dispersed, were now finding new protagonists and strategies of both violent and non-violent types. The movement became popular through a long and arduous path which had been putting up brave front against the government and local vested interests.

Gender Inclusion

It is true that Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini played commendable role in creating awareness among the illiterate women but women participation increased in this movement because their dependence on community resources is far greater than men. Anil Prakash, an activist of the GMA said that the thought to oppose the Farraka Barrage and Panidari system came from the fishermen's wife because fish and lobster disappeared and there income was threatened. The slogan of fishermen and women was 'Jal Baans Auzar Hamara, Ganga Per Adhikar Hamara' (Net and bamboo are our tools, we have right over Ganges) In 1987, a boat procession started with Kahlagaon to Patna with two boats and ended with 200 boats. Ganga Mukti Andolan was committed to the non-violent and socialist principles of Gandhi, Lohia and Jay Prakash Narayan.

'Mar Jayenge, mareng nahi, lekin manenge bhi nahi' (we will not compromise, we will not resort to violence even if we have to die) was the vow taken by 200 participants of the movement out of which 150 were women when they dare to convert an office of the local landlords att Kahalgaon into their own office on 19 December 1989.

The fisherwomen asserted themselves and secured more than 50% of seats in the committee, which was conducting the movement and gained control of the fund collected for the movement, as they felt that men squandered the money over useless things. They even succeeding in picketing local liquor shoaps which was responsible for many wrong doings on the part of the menfolk. The movement also incorporated several women related issues.

Towards Common Goal - Feminism and ecology

In 1990 nearly 80kms of area under Panidari system was freed and the movement spread to other areas along the Ganga river. In January 1991 Bihar government had declared that the fisherfolk would be given free fishing right in all rivers passing through the state. The process of acquiring fishing rights had truly empowered the fisherwomen, as it led to capacity building, autonomy in decision making, access to and control over their valued productive resources and the fruits of their labour deriving from control over their lives.

But they did not stop here, now these empowered women came forward with fresh energy against ecological degradation and destruction of the micro eco-system of the Ganges, which resulted into a sharp decline of fish. Parvati Devi an activist also says 'Our bellies are still empty, we have to fight against pollution of the Ganga'. The next movement has called for the closure of factories that polluted the Ganga.²² The activist have singled out four factories along the 256km. long stretch from Barauni to the Farraka Barrage which release harmful effluents. These included the Bata shoe factory and the Me. Dowell distillery, both of which empty 250,000 litres of waste a day.²³ The movement has also demanded the use of burning Ghat should be made free and the use of cloth net has been stopped. Unfortunately the process of the movement come to halt but the largest success of this movement was to convincing government about the pollution of Ganga.

Conclusion

The women's role in these movements has given agency and empowerment to them. From supportive role they accepted active role and became partners in the movement, were involved in the decision making process and gave direction to the movermerit. The Bodh Gaya movement, as well as Ganga Mukti Movement were revolutionary movements that initiated a process in which women were both subject of change and agent of change. These women articulated both their gender and class interest in group. Though eco-feminism has not yet developed into an independent social movement in India but in light of above observation we can see it happening in grassroots level through women empowerment. It also prove symbiotic relationship between eco-feminism and women empowerment. Gender Empowerment and Eco-feminism.

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