
Gender and Environment

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Abstract

Women are a part of the environment .They are directly linked with the nature broadly environment. Women who are part of the household or domestic area are directly linked with the environment. They depend on forest for fuel, food and animal husbandry specially women of the third world are connected with the environment for their day today existence. Even they depend on environment for drinking water.The environmental degradation is directly connected with the survival of the women folk .Vandana Shiva in her book 'Staying Alive' (1989) has pointed out how the women of the third world are directly connected with the environmental issues.The Chipko movement is the major example of its kind. The term eco-feminism is very much relevant these days, as because women and feminism are complementary to each other. Recent researchers are finding a direct link with women movement and environment movement. All these point to the single fact that women are integral part of environment and vice versa.

INTRODUCTION

The study of environmental history has now become important as a natural and inevitable result of a perceived "environmental crisis" in today's world.This perception has resulted in the development of a broad area called "Environmental studies".However ,in view of the important role of the scientists in the emergence of Environmental Studies-and the subsequent contribution of scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds to this field-it has remained an open ended subject.The historiography of environmental history has been expanding at such a remarkable pace in recent years that it is humanly impossible to keep pace with it.It has indeed emerged as a separate subdiscipline within the historical discipline in number of countries.Initially ,it appeared to be a device to arouse public consciousness to environmental crisis which the scientists ,engaged in various branches of biology and ecology,had identified.However ,it is increasingly being acknowledged now that the recent environmental crisis calls for a new paradigm for the future.

The concern for environment in human society has always been there.Of all the decisions human society takes ,perhaps the most crucial ones have always been related to the natural world.One of the flash points in the inner conflicts within the human society of the past was fuelled by the continuous effort to resolve the question

of the legitimate use of the natural world .As human settlements spread across the earth and the technology advanced ,the urge to resolve this fundamental question relating to the legitimate use of the natural world increased. With the passage of time the urgent need of resolving this unresolved question has been increasingly felt everywhere .It may be possible to explain many relations in the language of the power.The human encounter with the natural world too can be explained in the language of power.Environment is one of those spaces where we see the most intense form of demonstration of power.Nature may be seen as a parallel category with race ,class,gender,ethnicity or nationalism-that is ,as categories deployed to reveal power relationships in societies.¹The rapid unfolding of power relations ,the random misuse of the natural world ,the rise of new technology to exploit the nature and the growing resource crunch have now made this age old debate very dense and intense as never before.There seems to be a global realization that in the greater interest of human kind there should be a proper balance between the humans and the natural world.Modern environmentalism is in search of a clear definition of this proper balance.Environmental history is rooted in environmentalism and historians have joined this grand quest for a resolution as to the use of nature.Environmental historians are more concerned with the mistakes of the past,they have respect for the physical sciences and unbounded optimism of the capabilities of man.Environmental history certainly poses a challenge for mainstream history.It has already started to influence the border discipline and young historians are showing a great interest in this new sub discipline.

Recent trends in Environmental History:

Environmental history has benefitted in recent years from these recent shifts in history writing.The quest for alternative voices in history has exerted a sobering influence on the subject itself and made the conservative historians tolerant to ongoing swings within the discipline .The steady expansion of environmental history has given it a separate identity as a sub-discipline.Environmental history has survived the initial unfriendliness it experienced from the mainstream discipline.But ,this attitude to environmental history has undergone a qualitative change in recent years.

The economic system of the third world society is based on the patriarchal concept of productivity .It was created by the colonisers for fulfilling their own imperial wishes.The income of women were involved with cultivation specially of the Third World countries.Women produce also for their social existence and sustenance.The women folk are directly linked with the nature.The women depend on nature for fuel ,food,and fodder.The forests are considered by the womenfolk not as instrument of extraction but to meet their daily needs .The women collect bamboos and sticks from the forests which are not harmful for the ecosystem.Rather they indirectly maintain

ecosystem by collecting grass, sticks, fruits, vegetables, fodder which are beneficial to the existence of both nature and mankind. Even the water of nature is preserved by womenfolk. They collect water for drinking and sanitization purpose but are not in any ways harming the nature or their products. So the role of women is pivotal and positive towards nature.

Concept of Eco-feminism: Definition and Categories:

In the 1960s the environmentalism was in its full swing in Western Europe and USA. Specially women were participating in the environmental issues. But the women's ideology was not monolithic. The women's movement broadly could be called Ecofeminism. The word ecofeminism was first derived from French feminist Francoise D'Eaubonne in 1974. With the passage of time this concept has been given importance. This concept has been divided into three kinds-Liberal Ecofeminism, Radical Ecofeminism, Socialist Ecofeminism. 1) Liberal Ecofeminism is based on the liberal approach to feminism. They believe in co-existence. Women and men are part of the human ecosystem. So women also should take part in the environmental movement. They should be compatriots of their male partners. 2) Radical Ecofeminism is based on scientific observation i.e the freedom of women are being controlled by giving birth control pills, abortion, etc. This is also in the case with nature, where fertility of the soil is being malhandled by the male folk. 3) Socialist Ecofeminism-Here socialist form of state has been craved for to make women /nature in the same platform with the men. It is pro-Marxian concept, where women and men are working hand in hand in the socialist form of state craft. 3

Evolution of Eco-feminism in India:

But the development of scientific knowledge, the existence of nature is at stake as because nature is being misused in the name of development. The desert areas are facing problem for accumulation of water. The womenfolk are moving from one place to other in search of drinking water. Due to lack of pure water, many diseases are coming into existence. So the development of the society are not reaching to the level of womenfolk and the children who are mostly dependent of nature and environment for their existence. The industrialization has led to the environmental pollution. The ill effects of industrialization has led to water pollution, which indirectly is polluting the trees and indirectly entering human body. The children are the worst victim of Arsenic. The women of east and west are equally fighting for the cause of environmental degradation like the chipko movement in India of the 1970s. The chipko movement was a nonviolent and ecological movement by rural village particularly women aimed at protecting trees and forests. The movement began in the Himalayan region of Uttarakand in 1973 and quickly spread throughout the Indian subcontinent. The world

chipko 'means to hug' or 'to cling' to the trees. Sundarlal Bahuguna, Gauri Devi and others fought for the cause ladies to fifteen year ban on commercial felling of tree in Uttarkhand Himalayas.² In South Asia ,a basis for environmental history was laid and it began to emerge from the late 1980s.A series of books and articles brought forth this new quest for an environmental history of South Asia.Two of the first of these articles were written by Noth Americans,Robert K.Winters,a professional forester,the other a radical Indianist political historian Richard Tucker.Tucker aimed at drawing up a link between nationalist protest and the colonial forest policy in western India.With Tucker's article the whole pace of work changed and in the early 1980s writers from a whole variety of disciplines started to construct a coherent agenda in the environmental history of South and South East Asia.From this time onwards environmental history and forest history of India,in particular ,became intensely politicized.The process of politicization had begun with the rise of the Chipko Movement in northern India.It led to mobilization of women in the Garhwal region of Uttaranchal in Uttar Pradesh.It originated after the government decision to allot a plot of forest area in the Alakananda valley to a sports goods company.This angered the villagers because their similar demands to use wood for making agricultural tools had been earlier denied.Finally the villagers along with women went into the forest and formed a circle around the treespreventing the men from cutting them down.The movement was grand success of the women and created path for similar protest allover India. Ramchandra Guha,in his 'The un quiet woods:Ecological change and peasant resistance in the Himalaya'has given a detailed analysis to the chipko movement.⁴The new vision towards environmentalism has been brought to light by him.Ghanshyam Shah in his 'Social movements in India' has said, "The study is focused on the structures of dominance and the idioms of social protest.He had analysed the ecological changes and peasant resistance in the Himalayas in the wider comparative framework." Ghanshyam Shah further said "chipko movement became an ecology movement in 1977 when environmental action of the chipko was strengthened by public interest science captured in the slogan: what do the forests bear?soil,water and pure air".The environmentalism first began with the initiative of the white women⁵,later it was taken up by the natives like Vandana Shiva.She in her 'Staying Alive'has focused mainly on the contribution of the women in the environmental movement in the third world countries for their existence.She tried to connect the women and nature and said both were producers in comparision to the menfolk⁶.According to Shiva ,nature in Indian heritage is seen as a powerful force ,embodying feminine qualities.She is perhaps best known for her book , 'Staying Alive'.In this book Shiva analyses the results of the introduction of Green revolution in India.Shiva has used the chipko movement as a basis for this analysis .The book focuses

on the struggle of the Indian women in her efforts in sustaining and conserving life. Although nature is central to human survival, progress that threatens survival. With colonialism this ecological concept was undermined. Modern economic life interrupted the symbiotic relationship between women and nature. In its place the patriarchy introduced a knowledge system, which uses methods that undermine women and exploit nature. To institutionalize the system, management of nature was centralized with the purpose of promoting economic growth. In this economic model the wealth created by nature and women's work became subsidiary to men. But when nature is exploited maximum problem comes over to women and children. The result is environmental crisis, natural calamity, marginalization of women, dispossession, migration, poverty, violence and loss of lives. In order to make development sustainable, Shiva added feminine aspect to environmentalism.

Criticism of eco-feminism:

The critics of ecofeminism argue that Shiva has not included masculine aspect and underlying power politics associated with it. Many scholars disagree with the concept of drawing connection between women and nature. Bina Agarwal has coined a new word feminist environmentalism. She has highlighted the economic aspect of environmentalism. Here she argued women suffer more not due to gender specific reason but due to their socio-economic position. Shiva who neglects the Indian caste politics from pre colonial times for the gender bias attitude of society towards them. Shiva mainly highlighted colonial exploitation on the exploitation of nature.⁷

Conclusion:

In the 19th C the ill effects of industrialization has led to the rise of environmentalism in West Europe and USA. Prior to the World War I the environmentalism meant saving of wild animals but after World War II the environmentalism included saving water, soil, minerals, environmental i.e. climate and surrounding areas they are also keeping the environmental conservation as their first priority. The women reproductive organ, the fertility and virginity of the soil are synonym to the environmentalist. In the name of development, the said mensolk are controlling nature and women. Women and nature are objectified as victim of violence from the menfolk. The water used for industrial purpose is not usable for drinking and in the long run indirectly destroying the water supply. These have been focused in 'Chipko Movement', which was complementary to women and environment. Both women and environment has productive capacity which is destroyed by society and man. Maria Mies has been against patriarchal Capitalism, which is supporting the southern countries which are anti-capitalist and are against the rather countries which are pro-capitalist. The laws are also pro woman these days which are helping the women of south to fight for their

own cause specially after 1980s.8 Shiva and Mies followed the same pattern of drawing connection between women and nature.They both were against Eurocentric concept of development. They have been able to bring the women aspect of the environmentalism in the context of third world countries which can't be underestimated.

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