

Gender & Ecology: Spiritual & Cultural Elements of Indigenous Eco-feministic Thought

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Abstract: *This paper is an outcome of feminist research which emphasizes the role of women in environmental conservation in the Himalayan region. The argument focuses on issues such as women's viewpoint on the environment; the nature of their involvement and their inspirations to engage in conservation of ecology; challenges faced and solutions evolved to protect the environment. The paper further maintains that because of the traditional duties enforced by the patriarchal system on women, they are directly affected by ecological changes. However, the traditional wisdom which they have acquired over the years is helping them in emerging as the true custodians of resources. The paper explores the spiritual elements hidden in the traditional eco-feministic thought that have contributed to the sustenance of mountain communities. Since the global environment is undergoing transition, hence there is a need of percolating deep to understand and implement the traditional way of resource management.*

Keyword: Eco-feminism, Environmental Conservation, Ecology, Himalayan women

1. Introduction

"...through her body and the social roles that are conferred upon her because of her body, a woman is equated with nature..."

Tøllefsen, 2011

The relationship between gender and ecology is diverse though it differs with occasion, culture, and changing role of gender. In India, one can link eco-feminism, women's outlook towards nature, and the concept of sacredness. The bond between nature and women rests on the supposition wherein the organic evolution of the two is comparable and the earth is perceived as a nurturing mother. Work, culture, nature, and daily life are interlaced into a flawless web, and nurturing, female-identified earth is regarded as the root of existence (Seager, 1993). Agarwal (1992) and Jackson (1993) abridge the common fabric of eco-feminist thinking. According to them, there is a strong link between women and nature. In patriarchal thought, women are regarded as closer to nature and men closer to culture. To feminists, the woman-nature linkage is regarded as an important foundation of women's subordination. If nature is portrayed as inferior to the culture and women are linked with nature then logically women are seen as inferior to men (Agarwal 1992). Simone de Beauvoir pointed out that because men are unable to create through biological reproduction, theirs an artificial creation - through human culture (Jackson 1993).

Eco-feministic thought on the other hand has a spiritual aspect, covering many expressions of feminist concern where faith is linked with nature. Sandilands describes spiritual eco-feminism as ...the re-sacralization of nature, of the divine feminine inherent in all living beings (Besthorn and McMillen 2002). The idea that women are, because of their womanhood, religiously close to nature is central to

eco-feminist thought and is manifested in many forms of nature worship. The theory of the existence of Gods and Goddesses is also very much a component of eco-feminist spirituality. Thus, women's association with nature is seen as optimistic and transformational, a basis of strength and festivity.

Eco-feminism in the Indian context is more linked with Hindu thought, picking up the different facets of Hinduism as its underlying principles. Tomalin, 2008 quotes famous Indian eco-feminist Vandana Shiva:

'...women in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice. At one level, nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance...'

Shiv thus supports that result of worshipping something in nature or nature itself as divinity, leads to congenital and ecological existence. In her famous book, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India*, one finds her notion of 'the feminine principle' i.e., *prakriti*, as the source of life. Her thinking has a strong connection with spiritual eco-feminism particularly the ideas drawn from Hindu mythology. Women, according to her, are the original givers of life and caretakers of the environment, however, the western patriarchal development strategies evacuated the feminine principle and victimized women and the environment. Agarwal, (1993) on the other hand, expressed concern about the victimization of women in political, economic, and gender terms. However, both Shiva and Agarwal are of the view that since women are closer to the resource base, they are the fortunate custodians of the environment, which is also the key to women empowerment.

The Himalay are a mountain range in Asia, separating the Indian subcontinent from the Tibetan plateau. The flora and fauna of the Himalay vary with climate, rainfall, altitude, and soils. The climate ranges from tropical at the base of the mountains to permanent ice and snow at the highest elevations. This diversity of climate, altitude, rainfall, and soil conditions generates a variety of distinct plant and animal communities or eco-regions. Himachal Pradesh is a fascinating region of the Indian Himalay. Valleys set against magnificent snow-clad mountains; crystal clear lakes, flowing rivers, and spurring streams; fruit laden groves and soft terraces of corn and tea are characteristics of Himachal. The state is located between 30°22' and 30°12' north latitude and between 75°47' and 79°4' east longitude. The mountainous state has altitudes ranging from 350 to 7000 meters (1050 ft. to 21000 ft.) above the sea level. The communities residing in the state include *Brahmins*, *Rajputs*, *Kannets*, *Rathis*, and *kolis*, besides, tribal population. Like all world religions, beliefs and customs are an integral part of Himalayan culture, which venerate specific events with deep religious and ecological connotations and reinforce sacred beliefs, supporting the unity of its followers. The world of spirits is central where good spirits protect against damage, bad luck, sickness, etc., and give rain for crops and safeguard cattle. People have faith that these supreme unseen powers meditate on the Himalayan Mountains. Thus, nature and culture are linked with each other in the state and have given rise to a new concept, i.e., cultural ecology where ecology is linked with human culture. It integrates a society and its natural environment - the life-forms and ecosystems that support its lifeways.

2. Methods

The study is feminist research and employs a case study method, with twenty women as key informants who are directly or indirectly involved with ecology and its conservation. They have been chosen from selected pockets of Himachal. The study employed dialogical and interactive qualitative interviews. Interviews were designed to elicit information on women's perceptions and association with ecology, conservation measures adopted by Himalayan women, and motivational factors and challenges faced by women in conservation.

3. Results and Discussion

Women's Perceptions and Association with Ecology

Most informants view the environment as a life-supporting system, essential for the survival of humanity. According to women, the environment is the source of life and without it, the human race cannot live. The informants claimed that based on the tasks that they perform, women and ecology are interrelated. Just like nature, women are also life-givers, and nurturers of life. The ecological ethics lay emphasis on the interconnectedness of women and nature, which is reflected in various forms of nature worship that permeates across the entire range, which not only supports the concept of sacredness but also strengthens the idea of conservation. According to the womenfolk of village *Shakrori*, district Shimla:

"Our local myths and fables evoke in our hearts, the feelings of sacredness and reverence for nature. We worship natural caves, stalactites, and rocks for their inviolability. Located in the vicinity are sacred stalactites, which are thronged by women for begetting prosperity and protection of the family. These stalactites are considered as the benign form of Goddess *Gaiseewho* is worshiped after crop harvest. We believe that once a family starts visiting Goddess *Gaisee*, it has to maintain this custom lifelong. We offer newly harvested crop to Goddess, tie holy threads and apply vermilion on stalactites. We distribute the offerings among children."

Even though worshipped by the women for the welfare of the community and family, but deep inside their heart lies a concern for these stalactites, which not only offer them protection but also provide them due respect for standing for ages.

In yet another instance, people living in villages of district Mandi believe in *Jogini*, the unseen feminine powers which dwell in the rocks and caves. These are visited and revered for their religious significance. According to womenfolk:

"*Joginis* are associated with nature, planets, and human soul. These feminine powers reside in rocks and caves. A site dedicated to yoginis can be witnessed at *Sar ki Dhar* near *Rewalsar* in district Mandi. There is a total of sixty-four *yoginis*, out of which eight are most effective and are worshipped to avert negative planetary influences, resulting in infirmity and calamity. They are mainly worshipped on Saturday and the worship is made with ribbons, bangles, and *kichari* cooked in mustard oil. There is a war between Gods and these feminine powers in the month of August and it is a common notion that if Gods win, then there is increased incidence of diseases in animals, livestock, and crops, less agriculture production, while the triumph of *yogini* is considered positive."

Thus, worshipping of *Jogini*, is another tradition linked with nature worship, which is carried forward by women. Therefore, they not only worship the invisible power but nurture nature's elements. In tribal villages of district Kinnaur, people believe in the existence of fairies, locally named *Vandevi* (Goddess of forest) or *Saani*, who is supposed to reside in the forests and abandoned places particularly at a very high altitude. Fairies are deemed to control the life of tribal communities. According to tribal women:

"In order to propitiate fairies, we celebrate *Lamoth*, a festival which comes in the month of February. Offerings of local wine, *chiltu*, ethnic food, and curd are made to appease the fairies. We believe that during this festival, fairies take a trip in the entire region, which lasts for five days. Hence, the worship is made at the beginning and end of their voyage. The beginning of the tour is considered fortunate but the arrival is considered gloomy,

because, on their way back, they take away the living beings with them. Hence to avoid such a situation we remain inside our houses and the cattle are also kept in the sheds.”

Here, one can notice the intermingling of two different feelings, i.e., fear and admiration for nature's unseen powers, whose wrath, according to womenfolk, results in calamities and worship of the feminine powers by females for the well-being of entire humankind. In this case the entire responsibility is in the hands of the women community, who have sustained traditions and kept intact nature's elements.

In terms of resource consumption, women are major users of natural resources and any environmental degradation has direct implications on their status. According to informants, women's life is more dependent on the environment; hence environmental dilapidation affects the status of women and deprives them of a better quality of life and a healthy environment to live in. Himalayan culture has a special respect for Mother Nature, which is exemplified by the worship of natural water resources by newlyweds. The water is essential for survival, sustains life on the earth and its worship by newlyweds signifies yearning for prosperity. Maintenance of village paths by brides in district *Kangra* implies the concern of women for the spotless beauty of nature. There is another festival where women pay regards to water sources. The festival is locally known as *Sair* and is celebrated in the month of September on the *Sakrantiday*. Women say:

“...We get up early in the morning and natural water springs and fill our pitcher with water and make worship. *Sia*, a folk song in praise of Goddess *Sita*, is sung near the water source. Offerings including, citrus fruit, maize cob, paddy seedling, and walnut are placed near water source...”

In district Mandi, the same festival is mainly celebrated by womenfolk who gather near the water source a day before and place on a pumpkin leaf, a cucumber, walnuts, rice saplings, wheat bread, and a lighted lamp, near it. Thus, worshipping of nature as folk deities and relating folk-deities with nature, by womenfolk, symbolizes the bond between the two.

Flora of the Himalayan region not only finds multi-purpose use but has ecological significance. In tree worship, for instance, *Vatta puja*, women worship banyan trees and invoke the deity residing in them for the long life of their husbands. *Cedrus deodara*, *Ficus religiosa*, *Calotropis gigantea*, and *Ocimum sanctum* are worshiped by women on certain sacred days for begetting their blessings. After each plant worship circumambulation is done with a meditative mood to pay homage to the presiding deity.

An important event epitomizing the deep ecological thought hidden in the social and religious life of women is *Haryali Teej*, where welfare rejoices through the environment. During the festival, women craft clay idols of birds, animals, and plants in miniatures along with *Shiva*

Lingam, which is worshiped with green saplings of barley near a water source. Worshipping the barley seedlings signifies the adoration for new life and celebration of womanhood, whereas crafting of birds, plants, animal figures, etc. confirms people's sight & fondness for nature. Such festivity connotes the proximity of Himalayan women with nature and the celebrations encompass the entire creation into a single thread.

Women narrated that there are festivals that are linked with agriculture and livestock and are celebrated at the community level. Animal worship finds its basis in pastoral cult and cult of animals, where the animal species receive special honor and find an association with local deities. *Maal Purnima*, a festival, celebrated in the month of October, in district *Shimla* and *Mandi* is a pastoral cult, which is celebrated to honor the cattle, especially the cows and bulls for their role in agriculture and here the women play a very significant role. According to women:

“...The festival begins seven to eight days before the actual event, which is the day of the full moon. For all eight days, we gather at one place and sing *Mala*, a series of folk songs sung in praise of cattle. On the eve of the final event, all women assemble at one place and call the cattle by their names. The garlands are prepared using flowers & handmade rope. On the final day, we take the decorated animals out of their sheds and worship them with marigold flowers, *Cynodondactylon*, and *Juglans regia* followed by circumambulation. Thereafter, the cattle are served with festive food and released for grazing...”

A comparable festival linked with cow worship is *baula-chauth*, during which the women observe fast, worship cow and calf, commemorating the fertility and prosperity.

Women & Environmental Protection- Motivational Factors & Challenges

Women have varied participation in environmental conservation however, the nature of involvement varies. Women energetically involve themselves in tree worship, symbolizing their reverence for flora; cleaning-up of roads, denoting their affinity for land resources, and worshipping of water sources, connoting their respect for life itself. Traditionally, women are accountable for survival, though they rarely get the recognition for nurturing life; they have always been the chief custodians of natural resources. Even today, women are involved in the selection of seeds, their multiplication, and conservation. There are on-farm preservation traditions of rural women, with reference to agro-biodiversity. In rural areas, women deal with the non-monetized biomass-based subsistence economy of the household. However, the preference for urban jobs has increased male migration, which is adding to women's drudgery. Thus, rural women have a closer relationship with nature and its resources, which promotes a new culture of respectful use and preservation of natural resources and the environment, ensuring the fulfilment of the needs of future generations. Women's perceptions and ideals for ecology are somewhat different than men. They give more priority to environment protection and recuperating nature's carrying capacity and maintaining of farming lands.

The *Mahila Mandals* and Self-Help Groups (SHG's) are creating awareness programs, enabling communities to become responsible for the environment. Women in rural communities have evolved their own casual approach to solving problems at the local level. Using their indigenous wisdom, women have developed their own mechanisms of dealing with environmental issues. The rural women while collecting fodder and fuelwood from nearby forests; keep in mind, the concept of conservation. While collecting fodder they use their sickle in such a way that surrounding foliage is not damaged. The cultivation of rice by women, in groups, is an exceptional illustration of sustainable practice. Care is taken while transplanting the rice saplings. And to do so they sing folk songs that describe how to sow a sapling properly with proper spacing without damaging the sapling. The folk song given below is like a set of instructions given by the senior experienced women to the others for taking proper care during cultivation.

Women believe that the only way to survive is to conserve ecology and this is the primary motivational factor that encourages women in the environmental conservation program. Moreover, women's creative and productive energies to work for the environment can serve as a vehicle for the sustenance of mankind. The main challenge before the women is the availability of a low budget for the implementation of the program. There is a need of instilling a positive attitude, appreciation about the importance of clean air, clean water, and a healthy environment. Women are aware of the environmental impacts of hydropower projects and in tribal areas women have come forward as environmental activists against the setting up of power projects. According to women, they are not involved in policy formulation and decision-making in natural resource management, conservation, protection, and rehabilitation. To address the challenges faced by women in the implementation of conservation programs, the women involve themselves in house-to-house campaigns, organizing information education campaigns, besides initiating training and capacity-building activities. The credit for the success of Community-Led Assessment Awareness Advocacy and Action Programme for Environment Protection (CLAP) and Carbon Neutrality in Himachal goes to women groups such as *Mahila Mandal's* and NGOs. Based on their experiences, the informants put forward that women could really make a difference in enlightening the rural communities regarding the importance of environment, and also ensuring the active participation of rural women in environmental management.

The eco-feminism takes into account the natural feminine qualities, their connection with the earth and earth being the insignia of 'womanly'. Women, owing to their biological and psychological temperament, are nurturing, perceptive, receptive, and emotional. Women's biological cycles, i.e., reproduction and lactation, links them with earth. This uniqueness imparts them with the capability of communing with and feeling nature. When do we talk about ecological restoration from a global perspective, who is there in the front for the conservation of natural resources? The answer is women. Women belonging to rural mountain communities have a special association with the ecology. They are closer to nature and this proximity makes them ideal custodians of natural resources. The life of Himalayan women is so much

entwined with a natural setting that the whole ecosystem spins around her and her survival is not possible without it. For a mountain woman, the forest is like a mother's house as she is completely reliant on it to meet her daily requirements such as - water, fodder, fuelwood, minor forest product etc.

Eco-feminism refers to feminist perspectives on the environment. Recent movements have shown that women are more sensitive to the earth and its problems. They have evolved a special value system for the environment. Women are more action-oriented and more conducive to environmental protection and regeneration. Women view the environment as the life support systems and source of all life. However, women's limited access and opportunities in the decision-making process is the main constrain behind the implementation of their environmental conservation programs. A variety of woman-nature interconnections can be explored within eco-feminist thought and action, however, three connections seem central to eco-feminist theory-the empirical, the conceptual, and the epistemological. The empirical theory states that in most regions of the world, environmental problems unduly affect women. Conceptual concept symbolically connects women and nature. The eco-feminist epistemological claim establishes a connection between women and nature. The fact that women are most badly affected by ecological problems makes them expert in handling ecological issues and thus places them in a position of epistemological privilege, proving that they are more knowledgeable about earth systems than men. This means that rural women have acquired a privileged status which can create a new intellectual ecological paradigm. The only thing that is required is to bring them to the forefront.

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