

## Eco-feminism and Its Discontents:

# The Indian Context

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In the most generalized sense, ecofeminism makes connections and conceptualizes the historical connections between women and nature.<sup>1</sup> It also puts forth the theory that the ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment. Eco-feminism as a feminist thought critiques the patriarchal thought that have feminized nature and naturalized the feminine. It tries to rework a longstanding feminist critique of the naturalization of an inferior social and political status for women (Sturgeon 1997:24).

Eco-feminism assertively asks for rediscovering interconnectedness among all existing beings. India and the 'third world' in such analyses becomes an undifferentiated space and there is hardly any discussion on how such interconnectedness is possible in an undifferentiated space. In Vandana Shiva's and Maria Mies<sup>2</sup> analysis in *Ecofemi-*

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nism or *Staying Alive* men are largely invisible except as the other side of the dichotomy. Rural men's ecological work, knowledge and so on are subsumed under a genderless 'peasant'/'rural' or 'tribal' categorization, while the male-female, destroyer-protector dichotomy is maintained by an allusion to the dominance of women by the western industrial man (Leach and Green 1997:351). Not only are men invisible from Shiva's analysis, her critique of patriarchy is also mostly manifest in her critique of capitalist patriarchy, whose origins she locates in the west. Hindu patriarchy never becomes an issue in her work. The feminism in ecofeminism is limited to criticizing western patriarchy. Because she sees prakriti (the feminine principle) and purusha (the masculine principle)<sup>3</sup> as equals without actually looking at the complex gender relations that are inseparable from the caste structure, her ideas seem so dominantly Hindu.<sup>4</sup>

Eco-feminism's connection between nature and women that are based on biology, spirituality, and nurture, love and care that are claimed to be characteristics common to women and nature tends to be very essentialist. Most ecofeminists see this connection as a positive aspect. Therefore, for many ecofeminists, liberation does not require women to sever themselves from their sexual and reproductive biology or from nature. In an already gendered society where gender roles are specific and prominently used to justify subjugation of women to a domestic, 'natural' sphere, such essential connections are no way liberating. As Devika points out, the qualities of nurturing and caring that ecofeminism upholds

[...] are tied to the need to institute non-coercive, sentimental forms of social disciplining typical of middle class power. Affirmation of these values can also lead to the fact that apart from protecting nature, "socializing not only the young but also the wayward husband will be entrusted to women, claiming

precisely, a "natural" inclination supposedly ingrained in women stemming from their natural capacities (Devika 2002:273).

Such possibilities of domesticising women by the very same values they assert do not come under the consideration of Shiva and Mies who actually valorize domesticity and fail to see that it is born out of a patriarchal structure that limits choices for women.

Problematising the nature-women connection as made by ecofeminism, Bina Agarwal notes that Shiva's analysis essentializes the 'third world' and its women. She feels the need to critically question such ideological constructs to which ecofeminism falls prey:

It is critical to examine the underlying basis of women's relationship with the non-human world at levels other than ideology (such as the work women and men do and the gender division of property and power) to address how the material realities in which women of different classes, castes, races are rooted might affect their responses to environmental degradation (Agarwal 1999:101).

Not only does Vandana Shiva's brand of eco-feminism generalizes a concept to a whole set of diverse people and practices, it also attributes livelihood issues to a principle that is basically spiritual. And, not all women who are differentiated by class, caste, religion and sexualities would conceptualize their connection to nature through the idea of feminine principle. Moreover, Chipko and other initiatives by women related to nature issues can also be viewed from a completely different perspective, not as evidence of women's closeness to nature, but as a struggle for natural resources in the context of gender ascribed natural resource dependence. And, of course, the limited choices that women have to migrate outside the rural-natural context also force women to be more in touch with 'nature' or their immediate en-

vironment; while men go 'out' in search of better jobs, women are left 'behind' to look after the kids and whatever little land that belong to them (Leach and Green 1997:352). Therefore any close connection with environment is born out of compulsion in case of rural and urban women who are poor and not out of any principle operating since ancient times. Acknowledging Shiva's work on how colonial capitalism has affected our ecological economies, Agarwal points out to the fact that her work is not clear about "how and in which period the concept of feminine principle in practice affected gender relations or relations between people and nature" (Agarwal 1999:104).

What I contest most in Shiva's work is her argument and assertion that gender and nature subjugation in India is a result of colonialism, subsequent capitalist patriarchy and the western model of development. This has an implication that pre-colonial India enjoyed gender-equality and sustainability. Not only does this obscure the roots of patriarchy in caste structures of India but also denies all kinds of unequal divisions within the Indian society, whether distribution of power and property among women and/or different castes or distribution and propagation of knowledge and so on.

Eco-feminist accounts are also off the tangent when they discuss rural households and tribal communities. There is no discussion on how labour in the village and within households is controlled by a gendered and casteist system. Apart from this, Shiva's analysis is a kind of reconstruction of certain events and certain myths that create a 'golden age' that never existed. Archana Prasad validly argues in her *Against Ecological Romanticism*, about how such ecological romanticism can only block alternatives to the notion of capitalist development and progress. She points out how such romanticized golden ages are steeped in feudal histories and also how such accounts do not take into consideration the workings of local economies and household economies

that are tied to the caste economy. Moreover, endless talk about golden age leads us nowhere and in fact can be easily appropriated by fundamentalist forces (as it has happened in the case of Shiva's reverence for the cow and cow dung).<sup>5</sup> This is also true of the vegetarian diet many ecofeminists argue for. While vegetarianism in the west may be born out of health considerations and against the corporate meat industries' practices, in India, advocating vegetarianism amounts to supporting brahmanical values of vegetarianism. This is based on notions of purity and untouchability that is connected to eating. In a culture where the vegetarianism is a minority<sup>6</sup> (in numbers but powerful otherwise) that considers meat eating as polluting and specially eating the cow as blasphemous (a crime where the cow-eaters can be lynched to death), advocating vegetarianism may not wise. More importantly, in a country where most women suffer from malnutrition, are anemic, and pregnant women and children do not get enough nutrients, arguing against meat eating can be a problem when one considers factors like beef is as costly/cheap as dal and more protein rich.

One of the most problematic areas of ecofeminism is the spirituality it invokes. The invocation of a goddess or goddess symbol overlooks many things. Apart from being a symbolic power, does a goddess really challenge male religion? As Nivedita Menon asks, will the spiritual awareness brought about by ecofeminism translate into organized agitation? It is important to note that the right wing in India has been able to successfully tap the spiritualities of Indian women without disturbing the family system (Menon 1999, 12). Among women, spirituality has been politicized without creating any kind of disturbances in the hegemonic structures of Hindu family and society. And, as Gabriel Dietrich notes (Dietrich 1999:84-85), goddess in India have been manipulated into housewives, domesticated consorts and communalized ver-

sions of undomesticated, unspousified de-  
vis. Veneration for women as goddess in In-  
dia remains at an ideological level. Whether  
it is the female principle, or Lakshmi, the  
goddess of wealth, or Sara-swati-the god-  
dess of education, the concept is contrary  
to practice. For, women were/are not enti-  
tled to any kind of property or wealth (in  
spite of Lakshmi) and women were barred  
from learning of any kind (in spite of Sara-  
swati). Even now, despite a change in con-  
stitutional law that guarantees women equal  
right to property, its implementation at per-  
sonal and community levels is dismal and  
even scorned upon.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, questioning the positing of  
women in India as a singular category, I  
have tried to outline my own answers as to  
how the question of difference among  
women within and outside their relation to  
nature can be looked at.

#### OF REPRESENTATIONS

The number of miles a woman has to travel  
to fetch water (or firewood) in India is of-  
ten quoted by a range of researchers, most-  
ly environmentalists and ecofeminists (I  
have even read one which spoke about  
walking miles for water in the capital Delhi  
[Warren], without any specific references or  
examples! The problem of drinking water  
and the urban poor has nothing to do with  
distance in Delhi.) It is certainly disap-  
pointing to read such accounts of general-  
ization without the slightest of differentia-  
tion. It is true that women and children  
walk miles to fetch drinking water in most  
places in India. It is also true that women  
and men among both urban and rural poor  
find it more and more difficult to access  
water and fuel. My argument is that we  
cannot categorize the poor as simply 'ur-  
ban' or 'rural', which has been the most  
common categorization with academic re-  
search on/in India. If I am clear enough,  
readers can sense that I am not arguing  
against a class analysis. Instead, as many

academic and non-academic thinkers of the  
caste system have pointed out, in India, it is  
the caste structure that dominates and de-  
fines class and gender constructions. There-  
fore, the questions we frame need to use  
more nuanced terms than 'urban poor' and  
'rural poor'. For e.g.:

1. Who exactly are these urban poor and  
rural poor women? (Sometimes men)
2. Do the statistics/research connect the  
poor to the caste structure?
3. Why is it important to differentiate gen-  
der and class in terms of caste?
4. How does the caste ideology/structure  
perpetuated for centuries have bearings on  
the material and ideological connections  
between women and nature?
5. How different are ideological/metapho-  
rical and material connections for women  
of different caste?
6. What role does the patriarchal caste sys-  
tem play at each of these differentiated lev-  
els?

How do we confront these questions? A  
look at the census of India does indicate  
some answers though unsatisfactorily. The  
last caste based census in India was done in  
1931. Since then and after independence,  
though census takes into account the statis-  
tics of scheduled castes and scheduled  
tribes (no statistics is available for other  
castes), the obvious relation between po-  
verty and caste has not been made.<sup>8</sup> Hence,  
it becomes more important to connect  
caste with class to establish links that are  
obvious. While at the same time, it be-  
comes important to differentiate gender in  
terms of caste because of the ritualistic/so-  
cial hierarchy that pervades the day to day  
lives of women and men. Ritualistic hier-  
archy of caste and patriarchy within the caste  
system that has been internalized over cen-  
turies has been largely responsible for con-  
struction of images, values, perceptions and  
representations of women and nature. And  
because relations with nature vary with the

occupation (again directly related to caste), women of different castes have different relations with nature. Though patriarchy pervades the caste system and most tribal communities in India, the caste system works in a way that divides women hierarchically.

How can feminism confront these divisions among women? There is a steady growth in academic and non-academic Dalit feminism that challenges the mainstream feminism in India that has almost always been upper caste and which had never thought of the woman problem as structured in caste. Since my interest here is limited to the nature, culture and gender connections, the overarching presence of caste on all spheres of life is seen through these connections.

The connections made with nature for some women have been spiritual, for some material, for some ideological. The constructions vary from that of mother-nature, mother-earth, mother-goddess, nature-mother/goddess to that of wild, unpredictable nature and women. While 'culture' has been the forte of the upper-caste (especially brahmin), nature/natural has been associated with the lower-castes/tribes/peasantry who labour in the wild, in the lands belonging to the upper-castes. This implies the obvious fact that upper-caste women belong(ed) to a 'high-culture' as against the lower-caste women who are 'uncultured' and whose lifestyles and ways of dealing with the world, whether art forms or any other expressive forms, could never rise to the brahmin defined 'culture'. The idea that nature is co-produced is partly true here. Ingold discusses how humans and nature co-produce the world they share and how it is determined by various factors (Cruikshank 2005). The relation to land and nature is determined to a large extent by the nature of one's birth as determined by the caste structure. And like Simon Schamo (1995), who throughout his work asserts the idea that there is culture before there is nature, we need to empha-

size politically culture's role in determining the nature of human relation with nature.

The invoking of an all powerful shakti/prakriti image for women has led to the popular image of Indian women with their strong connections to nature being powerful resisters of western dominance. This has also been influential in creating a celebratory image of women and nature while moving out of the victim's image (especially with images from the Chipko movement). As Bina Agarwal, Gabriel Dietrich and many others have pointed out, this generalized analysis blinds one to the oppressive structural practices already present for centuries before colonial rule. The analysis does not take into account the land/property distribution and the labour division (between and among women and men). And, the symbols of shakti/prakriti are overwhelmingly ideological with little or no connection whatsoever to the material practices and to the lives of people affected by colonial and casteist policies. Locating capitalist patriarchy within the colonial practices also overlooks the fact that patriarchy was/is the established norm for most communities in India. And if not for the 'modern' form of capitalism, the feudal form of it that existed almost all over India where few upper-caste men held property, land rights and access to wealth and knowledge is completely obscured.

The documentary film *Eternal Seed* by Meera Dewan provides us with a good example of why we need to differentiate connections between women and nature. *Eternal Seed* documents the lives of women who revere the land they own and their working relationship to it in a religiously spiritual mode. The women in the documentary are all single. What is not told to us is the fact as to whether these women are single by choice or widowed or divorcees and to which caste they belong. Women (single/married/divorced/widows – whether upper or lower caste) owning land is a rare phenomenon. The women in the film sup-

port themselves and their children with their land that provides them with a sustainable livelihood. Men do not figure anywhere in the picture. Not only do the religious marks on the women's foreheads indicate their upper-caste status, but also their indirect comments on meat-eating say a lot (comments like meat-eating kids are spoiled, they do not have good habits). These are obvious references to the meat eating lower-castes. The documentary is in Kannada and unfortunately, the English sub-titles do not translate such actual speech of the characters. The translation only highlights the 'Indian/Hindu' woman's agricultural practices and her relationship with nature/land which is spiritual and that very quality separates her from the capitalist western practices, which the film rightfully critiques.

Interestingly, I got to know and watch this documentary during my stay in the US. It definitely showcases a diverse and sustainable world to the western audience. Even in the lives of the chosen women, patriarchy is overwhelmingly present (and again, such markers and utterances do not get translated). And sadly, the structure of patriarchy that governs most Indian women's lives is conveniently absent. These women are obviously upper-caste small-scale farmers/or their wives who do not have any choice in their livelihood practices (they may not even be aware that such choices exist), not to mention alternative life-styles. And their need to labour in their own land/field is a result of the present semi-feudal, semi-capitalist context of India where finding labour (which means lower-caste) for a small-scale farming can be a difficult for various reasons.

#### TOWARD A CONCLUSION

So what does the connection between nature, women and culture mean in this context? Nature here, for me, means any culture's/community's/society's immediate environment, the immediate eco-system

that has a direct/indirect relation with the human society that it sustains. It also means an entity that has been acted upon differently by different societies/communities that have inhabited them at different points of time and space. This is to say that nature cannot be seen as isolated or separate from the human material world. There is also a need to see how the human-nature relation is casteised and gendered, in terms of land rights, access to natural resources, division of labour and also in terms of metaphors that have helped these divisions stay intact. Except for a minority of tribal communities, the caste system dominates all human-nature relations. In effect, human-nature relations cannot be viewed separately from caste. So, the natural, the immediate living material world, is constructed through caste terms intertwined with gender and other factors. And interestingly, though most castes worship nature, the meaning of worship varies and the kind of worship varies from region to region, from caste to caste in the form of certain festivals, it could be rivers, trees, agricultural lands, fire, water etc.

If nature means a continuing relationship (whether it is of reverence, material, social, livelihood, etc.) between the natural and the human and as pointed out earlier, if it is not the same across communities and castes, how can we singularly define nature's relationship in terms of women and men? As the argument goes, the commonality that should be binding all women from most communities is patriarchy. And according to certain ecofeminist arguments, the essential nature of women that makes them more loving, nurturing and the fact of reproduction that they happen to share with the reproductive nature is what should be binding all women into one single category. Are these commonalities so overwhelming that the differences do not matter? Or do these connections make any sense at all to various categories of women? Differences, including caste but mainly

caste, matter because caste separates women and divides them not only on a structural, hierarchical basis but also divides them in terms of rights, access to 'knowledge', resources and to the way they relate to nature. Therefore, the need is to divide the differences among women on the lines of land rights, property rights, caste, division of labor and its relation with caste structure, nature worship/goddess worship, metaphors connecting women and nature, 'development', the global, local and capital connections.

It should be obvious that with a history of such oppressive divisions, every caste/community has evolved its own social and cultural life that is exclusive of each other, that reflects its own history in a broader context. Therefore, we need to aim at bringing out the connections between women and nature, women and women, women and men, men and nature as part of the structure that constructs us and represents us in different kinds of expressions instead of positing the connection between women and nature as singular and as a solution to problems of women and environment.

## NOTES

1. 'Nature' here is used in its conventional sense – as being the non-politicised version of environment. While by essentialism I mean a certain fixed set of meanings associated and generalized to a large group of different people divided not only by socio-cultural and religious practices but also by hegemonic unequal hierarchy.

2. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies are the most prominent and most popular proponents of 'Indian'/'third world' ecofeminism and their texts have been instrumental in influencing several government initiatives and the non-governmental sector that fund many a developmental project on women and environment. Though others like Agarwal, Dietrich, Devika, Leach and Green, Prasad and other have discussed Ecofeminism/Environmental Feminism, they have done so in a way very unlike Shiva and Mies essentialise, spiritualise, and hinduise notions of women and environment

in the context of India. Despite these problems, Shiva especially is very visible and influential. Therefore the essay concentrates on their primary work and does not assume that Ecofeminism is monolithic – doing so would be against my argument of recognizing differences.

3. Vandana Shiva categorizes this as the "female principle" which is also termed as shakti or prakriti. I quote from her *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*.

"In the world view personified by the Chipko women, nature is prakriti, the creator and the source of wealth, and rural women, peasants and tribals who live in, and derive sustenance from nature, have a systematic and a deep knowledge of nature's processes of reproducing wealth. Nature and women do not acquire value through domination by modern, western man; they lose both through this process of subjugation." (Shiva 1988:219).

"This primordial energy [shakti/prakriti] which is the substance of everything pervades everything. The manifestation of this power, this energy is called nature. Nature, both animate and inanimate is thus an expression of shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos, in conjunction with the masculine principle (purusha), prakriti creates the world. Nature as prakriti is inherently active, a powerful, productive force in the dialectic of creation, renewal and sustenance of all life." (Shiva 1988:40).

4. In the Indian context, patriarchy is over-written by caste. Lower caste women being the lowest in the order are controlled by casteist-patriarchy that operates at many levels.

5. See *In Praise of Cow Dung* for Shiva's elaborate explanation of how cow and cow dung have served the Indian people and how Indian people in turn hold them sacred and therefore not eat the cow unlike Christians and Muslims. See <http://www.zmag.org/Sustainers/content/2002-11/12Shiva.cfm>.

6. A study by The Hindu-CNN-IBN, on the food habits of Indians shows that the percentage of Indians who are meat-eating (more than 60%) and vegetarian (less than 40%). The study also shows how the food habits of people are related to caste/region/religion. Among the vegetarians surveyed, around 55% were brahmins and around 28% other upper-castes. See Yadav, Yogendra, and Sanjay Kumar. "The Food Habits of a Nation." Hindu 14 Aug. 2006: 12.