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The Relevance of The Feminism Movement in the Twenty -First Century



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Ecofeminism in the Context of India with Reference to Environmental Movements

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Introduction

The idea of feminism has not particularly attached to a specific country but also it has the international significance. The awareness about the exploitation of women, about their equal rights and dignified life has started in the form of various movements that started happening into the various nations. The term 'feminism' has different definitions or understandings with different context. According to some it can be the 'force of tremendous powers to women'. Idea of feminism has developed in various waves of which the 1st can be counted as the movement for political suffrage in the mid-19th century in European nations. However, the 2nd and 3rd waves of feminism goes beyond than this. The decades of 1960s or 1970s reflects the second phase of feminism. "In this second wave, feminists pushed beyond the early quest for political rights to fight for greater equality across the board, e.g., in education, the workplace, and at home."^{vi} Beyond than this the third wave of feminism has started in the early 1990s where women started focusing on the lacunas of second wave and highlighting the 'identity' issues.

Overall, the idea or the concept of feminism is very broad, comprehensive and dynamic as per development of time and situation. Feminism is an ideology which has developed for the liberation or the emancipation of women. However, it has to take into account that the concept of feminism cannot be studied in singular form rather it has multiple facets. The concept and its implications have developed in its plural form. One of such popular form is ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism – conceptual framework

Ecofeminism is a connecting bridge between women and nature. Duties performed by the women are closely associated with the nature. The reasons for the emergence of the ecofeminism can be traced in various movements like peace movement, green movement, feminism and movements as a result of impacts of world wars. "The term "Ecofeminism" was coined by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. It was further developed by Ynestra King in about 1976 and became a movement in 1980, with the organization, in the same year, of the first ecofeminist conference – "Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s", at Amherst, Massachusetts, US".^{vii} Ecofeminists criticised the patriarchal system to be responsible for the destroying environment and exploiting women. It does not merely attack on men but also reflects the environmental concerns. It has its inclusive nature also close relations with the local activities.

Development of Ecofeminism in Indian Context

The stream of ecofeminism in case of India is strongly advocated by the Vandana Shiva. She has closely related how patriarchy exploits women in performing the domestic chores which are quite related to the environment. She considered the growth of modern day's science and technology as the impact of western powers, patriarchal and repercussions of colonialism. In case of traditional Indian philosophy, the idea of nature or 'prakriti' is similar like the idea of women as both bears the capacity of sustaining life.

The ecofeminism is also reflected through the literature. "Literature in which the concept of ecofeminism has been taken into account ranges from early ecofeminism to the recent or the urbanized one such as 'Nectar in a Sieve' (1954) by Kamala Markandya, 'Fire on the Mountain' (1977) by Anita Desai, 'A Riversutra' (1993) by Gita Mehta, 'The God of Small Things' (1997) and



'An Atlas of Impossible Longing' (2008) by Arundhati Roy and 'Monkey-Man' (2010) by Usha K.R.^{viii} Literature like these explore various matters and issues related to women and environment through various perspectives.

There is another perspective in case of India about the ecofeminism. "When we talk about connectedness in the context of India, we have to mention another perspective of ecofeminism and that is more material than spiritual."^{ix} This approach of ecofeminism does not believe on the environmental spirituality rather it focused on the materialistic things. There are certain social factors of which relationships are based on materialistic factors than spiritual. Also, another perspective gives more importance to the political and social phenomenon rather than spiritual in India for the emancipation of women.

With these various perspectives there are various movements which have risen with regard to the environmental degradation. These movements show the greater participation of women in terms of their connectivity with nature. Thus, coming under the arena of ecofeminism. These movements are explained as follows-

Environmental Movements

Chipko Movement

The roots of post-colonial Chipko Movement can be traced in the colonial times. The Khejari Movement in 1730, led by Amrita Devi and the Bishnois (tribal community) in Rajasthan, also held as India's original environmentalists, is believed to be the precursor of the Chipko Movement where the Bishnois risked their lives to the sacred Khejari trees as these were also important for their survival. The exploitative forest policies of British government in India were later embodied in the Forest Act of 1865 which put restrictions on the village especially tribal communities' access to forest resources. The village communities resisted such policies by adopting Gandhian methods like Forest Satyagraha. This legacy of organized resistance continued even after independence as the Forest Department incorporated such exploitative practices from the old Forest Act of 1865 in the name of 'development'. Many women, especially from tribal communities, had participated in this movement. It was in this context that Chipko Movement emerged as one of the first eco-feminist movements in India in the decade of 1970s. The term Chipko means to embrace or to hug, referring to the brilliant strategy which was to hug or stick to the trees in order to prevent them from commercial exploitation and deforestation at the hands of the government.

Our knowledge about Chipko Movement acknowledges that Sundarlal Bahuguna, a Gandhian activist, organized the women and initiated this movement in Garhwal region i.e. Uttar Pradesh state to protect the Himalayan forest cover there. However, Vandana Shiva, the renowned eco-feminist, points out how even the women's movement like Chipko movement has highlighted only male leadership like Sunderlal Bahuguna, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Dhoom Singh Negi whereas they themselves were inspired from the work and knowledge of women like Mira Behn, Sarala Behn, Gunga Devi and many others and yet they remain unnoticed.

All these women who had participated in the Chipko movement had the local knowledge about the forests and the plant species even more than the men since they were the ones who were in close contact with these forests for their daily survival and hence had more insights on sustainable development. "We must remember that the main role of the hill forests should be notto yield revenue, but to maintain a balance in the climatic conditions ofthe whole of northern India and the fertility of the Gangetic Plain."^x

This was a demand reiterated by Sarala Behn in 1978 in her Blueprint for Survival. Mira Behn's insights on the ecologically appropriate Banj trees and their role in protecting the Ganga basin from floods and drought which can only bring losses if replaced by the commercial pine trees, also guided Sundarlal Bahuguna. The forest officials who had come to cut the trees in Adwani district called the resisting women under the leadership of BachnaDevifools as they did not know the real



importance of forests lied in the resin, timber and profit attained only by cutting them. The response they received from these women shows how they knew the importance of sustainable development. They responded-

“What do the forests bear?

Soil, water and pure air.

Soil, water and pure air

Sustain the earth and all she bears.”^{xi}

Ideas and strategies like these of Chipko movement inspired not only the other environmentalist movements in India but also the women to fight against the capitalist patriarchal state.

However, Unlike Vandana Shiva who sees Nature as the feminine principle (Nature as Prakriti) which is translated into women as inherent conservers of environment, Bina Agarwal, another renowned eco-feminist, on the other hand refuses to understand eco-feminism in this framework. For her, women have more knowledge and willingness to conserve forests because unlike men, they have less access to private property like land and also because of the gendered division of labour related to collecting firewood and water which makes them rely on the limited forest resources.

Women, especially from rural and tribal areas, thus have more knowledge compared to urban women about the forests since their daily survival depends upon these resources. Thus, rather than exploitative commercialized use of forests, they prefer sustainable use of the resources. Bina Agarwal thus links the class of women, their access to private property and conservation knowledge about environment.

Narmada Bachao Andolan

Another significant environmental movement in India that has been largely debated in the context of ‘development’ and the Utilitarian principle of ‘Greater happiness of greatest number’ is Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). Narmada being the large western flowing river crossing the three states of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh is not only enriched with the natural resources but also provides the means of livelihood to the rural people. The NBA emerged as the resistance to the proposed dam projects on Narmada River which would have caused the displacement of the native Adivasis and local farmers. “The proposed Sardar Sarovar Dam and Narmada Sagar will displace more than 250,000 people.”^{xii}

The resistance to these dam projects in Gujarat had already started by these native Adivasis and local farmers. However, it grew larger as the NBA and grabbed more attention from the press, media, political parties and other organizations after Medha Patkar (renowned environmental activist) joined the movement in 1986 by organising a march.

Save the Western Ghats Movement

In the decades of 1980s, there is another environmental movement popularly known as Save the Western Ghats. This encompasses the regions of six states from the state of Gujarat till Tamil Nadu. This region is very rich with biodiversity and plenty of natural resources. “It had also put on record that the region has been one of the important global biodiversity hotspot that harbours 1,741 species of flowering plants and 403 species of birds among a vast variety of reptiles and large The Western Ghats, older than the Himalayas, are among 34 Global Hotspots of Biodiversity in terms of flora, fauna, landscape and ethnicity.”^{xiii} To preserve these natural resources the movement was started by the local people. It was against the building of dams, power stations and felling down trees. The positive impact of this movement that the government of Karnataka has to cancel the plan for construction of dam.

Conclusion

Ecofeminism takes into account the impacts of human beings on the non-human world from feminist perspective. It is a value-based approach. Ecofeminism reveals the link between gender and

nature. Nature can satisfy the human needs but it is the human being through their developmental activities are harming nature. This eco-centric view is at the heart of other types of feminism as well. For the development of sustenance of generation, resources and sustainable growth perspective ecofeminism helps. Ecofeminism combines the multiple other social movements. Thus, ecofeminism is not just about the relationship between women and environment but it also interconnects gender, class, caste, race and nature altogether. Certainly, being one of the significant approach ecofeminism interconnects positive relationships which are helpful for the sustenance of the better world.

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