
Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: A Review

by

Manisha Rao *

Abstract: A large and growing body of literature on ecofeminism in the West relates gender and environment mainly in ideological terms. In India however, growing protests against environmental destruction and struggles for survival and subsistence point to the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply interlinked. In this paper, I will look at the main tenets of ecofeminism and the critiques that have been leveled against them. Then I will try to contextualize this debate within the Indian environmental movement and highlight the interconnections of caste, class and gender issues in it. Further I would attempt to see whether the issue of environment has been taken up by the Indian women's movement. If not, whether the women's movement would benefit and become more broad-based by taking up the issues that concern women of different caste and class. At the same time, whether the Indian environment movement would benefit by taking up a feminist perspective.

Introduction

A large and growing body of literature on ecofeminism in the West relates gender and environment mainly in ideological terms. In India however, growing protests against environmental destruction and struggles for survival and subsistence point to the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply interlinked. In this paper, I will look at the main tenets of "ecofeminism", and the critiques that have been leveled against them. Then I will try and contextualize this debate within the Indian environmental movement and highlight the interconnections of caste, class and gender issues in it. Further, I will attempt to see whether the issue of environment has been taken up by the Indian women's movement. If not, how the Indian women's movement would benefit and become more broad based by taking up issues that concern women of different caste and

* Dr. Manisha Rao is an Assistant Professor at the University Department of Sociology, S.N.D.T. Women's University, Mumbai, India. After completing a Master in Sociology at University of Pune and an M. Phil. from Dept. of Sociology, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi, India, she went on to complete her Ph. D. in Sociology from the University of Pune. Her research was on the study of an Environmental Movement – *Appiko* Movement in Southern India, which is forthcoming as a book. Her areas of interest include Environment, Gender & Development Studies. She has presented papers at national and International conferences & published articles in various journals and books. She lives in Mumbai, India with her family. Contact Information: Dr. Manisha Rao, Assistant Professor, University Dept. of Sociology, S.N.D.T. Women's University 1, N.T. Road, New Marine Lines, Mumbai, India- 400020 manisharao008@gmail.com

class, and simultaneously to gauge how the environment movement would benefit by taking up a feminist perspective.

Emergence of Ecofeminism

Movements all over the world that are dedicated to the continuation of life on earth, like the Chipko movement in India, Anti-Militarist movement in Europe and the US, movement against dumping of hazardous wastes in the US, and Green Belt movement in Kenya, are all labeled as “ecofeminist” movements. These movements attempt to demonstrate the “resistance politics” (Quinby 1990) working at the micro-levels of power and point to the connections between women and nature. They also claim to contribute to an understanding of the interconnections between the domination of persons and nature by sex, race and class. Ecofeminism emerged in the West as a product of the peace, feminist and ecology movements of the late 1970s and the early 1980s. 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 (Spretnak 1990).

The conference explored the connections between feminism, militarism, health and ecology. It was followed by the formation of the Women’s Pentagon Action, a feminist, anti-militarist, anti-nuclear war weapons group. According to ecofeminist Ynestra King: “Ecofeminism is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice...(it sees) the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation by the military warriors as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way”(King 1983).

Whenever women protested against ecological destruction, threat of atomic destruction of life on earth, new developments in biotechnology, genetic engineering and reproductive technology, they discovered the connections between patriarchal domination and violence against women, the colonized non-western, non-White peoples and nature. It led to the realization that the liberation of women cannot be achieved in isolation from the larger struggle for preserving nature and life on this earth. As philosopher Karen Warren (1987) puts it: “Ecofeminism builds on the multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses, for example – Chipko women – in developing a global perspective on the role of male domination in the exploitation of women and nature (Datar 2011). An ecofeminist perspective is thereby...structurally pluralistic, inclusivist and contextualist, emphasizing through concrete example the crucial role *context* plays in understanding sexist and naturist practice”.

Nature of Ecofeminism

Recent works by feminists Susan Griffin (1978) and Mary Daly (1978), Carolyn Merchant (1980), Ynestra King (1981), Ariel Kay Salleh (1984), Karen Warren (1987, 1990), Val Plumwood (1993) and others, highlight the fact that ecology is a feminist issue. The connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are highlighted in order to understand “why the environment is a feminist issue”, as well as “why feminist issues can be addressed in terms of environmental concerns” (Gaard 1993, p. 4). However, there are disagreements about the nature of these connections and whether they are “potentially liberating or simply a rationale for the continued subordination of women” (King 1981, p. 12). Thus, while many feminists agree that ecology is a feminist issue, they differ over the nature and desirability of “ecofeminism”. Hence, just as there are a variety of feminisms, so there are a variety of ecofeminisms, too. Ecofeminism is based on certain fundamental claims that point to the existence of important connections between the oppression of women and oppression of nature. It is essential to understand the nature of these connections in order to understand the oppression of women and nature, and finally, every feminist theory must include an ecological perspective and vice versa (Warren 1987).

Ecofeminism can be defined as a “value system, a social movement, and a practice... (which) also offers a political analysis that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction. It is an “awareness” that begins with the realization that the exploitation of nature is intimately linked to Western Man’s attitude toward women and tribal cultures...” (Birkeland 1993, p. 18). Within the patriarchal conceptual framework, all those attributes associated with masculinity are given higher status or prestige than those associated with femininity, resulting in ‘hierarchical dualisms’ (Warren 1987, pp. 6-8). All ecofeminists are of the view that it is the “logic of domination”, in association with value-hierarchical thinking and value-dualisms that sustains and justifies the twin domination of women and nature (Warren 1990). For ecofeminists, therefore, the domination of women and nature is basically rooted in ideology. In order to overcome this, one needs to reconstruct and reconceptualize the underlying patriarchal values and structural relations of one’s culture and promote equality, non-violence, non-hierarchical forms of organization to bring about new social forms. According to the ecofeminists, one also needs to realize the inter-connectedness of all life processes and hence revere nature and all life forms. Humans should not try to control nature, but work along with it and must try to move beyond power-based relationships. This would mean integrating the dualisms on the polarization of the male and the female in one’s conception of reality. Importance should also be given, the ecofeminists argue, to the *process* rather than only to the goal. The personal is political, and hence the female private sphere is just as important and applicable to the male public sphere. One needs to change the patriarchal nature of the system by withdrawing power and energy from patriarchy (Gaard 1993, pp. 16-20). Ecofeminist theory has brought into sharp focus the links between development and gender. It has highlighted the fact that the violence against nature and against women is built into the dominant development model.

Perspectives on Ecofeminism

The different configurations of ecofeminism reflect the different ways of analyzing the connections between women and nature, as well as the differences in the nature of women's oppression and solutions to them, the theory of human nature, and the notions of freedom, equality and epistemology on which depend various feminist theories.

Some feminist scholars like Carolyn Merchant (1992) have categorized ecofeminist theory into liberal, radical or socialist frameworks. However, leading versions of feminism have not, in fact, articulated their position on ecology or on the nature of the connection between the twin oppressions of women and nature. In the 1960s, the feminist movement demanded equity for women in the workplace and in education as a method to achieve a fulfilling life. At around the same time, Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring* (1962) focused attention on the effects of pollution on the human and non-human world, making the question of life on earth a public issue.

For the ecofeminists of the liberal mode (as for liberal feminists in general), environmental problems are a result of the rapid exploitation of natural resources accompanied by the lack of regulation of pesticides and other environmental pollutants. This can be overcome by a social production that is environmentally sound. For this, one requires better science, conservation and laws. With equal educational opportunities, women can become scientists, natural resource conservators, lawyers, and so on, like men. Thus, these ecofeminists attempt to change human relations with nature through the passage of new laws and regulations. However, just training women to be lawyers and environmental scientists will not solve the increasing problem of environmental degradation. Those ecofeminists fail to question the whole development process, which is the primary cause of environmental destruction.

As a rejoinder to the view that associated women with nature, both of which were devalued in western culture, ecofeminists with a radical bent analyzed environmental problems from within their critique of patriarchy and offered alternatives that could liberate both women and nature (Merchant 1990, p. 93). This perspective draws from the now famous article by Sherry Ortner, *Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?* (1974). The ecofeminists celebrate the relationship between women and nature through the popularization of ancient rituals centered on the Mother Goddess, the moon, animals and the female reproductive system. This prehistoric era, centered on goddess worship, was dethroned by an emerging patriarchal culture with male gods to whom the female deities were subservient. Nature was further degraded by the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, that replaced the nurturing earth with the "metaphor of a machine to be controlled and repaired from outside...The earth is to be dominated by male developed and controlled technology, science and industry"(Merchant 1992, p. 191).

So these ecofeminists argue against the dominant view that women are restricted by being closer to nature, because of their ability to bear children. In fact, women's biology and nature are seen as sources of female power to be celebrated.

Critiques of Ecofeminism

However, as various feminist scholars, such as Cecile Jackson (1993), Janet Biehl (1991), Meera Nanda (1991) and Bina Agarwal (1992) have pointed out, this ecofeminist perspective is “ethnocentric, essentialist, blind to class, ethnicity and other differentiating cleavages, ahistorical and neglects the material sphere” (Jackson 1993, p. 398).

Ecofeminist literature portrays the historical exploitation and domination of women and nature as going hand in hand, and both are seen as victims of development. It is taken as self-evident that any harm to nature harms women equally, since women are seen as closer to nature than men. None of the ecofeminist literature attempts to establish this linkage through concrete evidence or strong argument. It is very anecdotal and takes its position as self-evident. It locates the domination of women and nature mainly in ideology, thereby neglecting the “interrelated material sources of dominance based on economic advantage and political power” (Agarwal 1992, p. 122) as well as the gender division of labor and distribution of opportunity. These ecofeminist images of women, in fact “retain the patriarchal stereotypes of what men expect women to be. “(They)...freeze women as merely caring and nurturing beings instead of expanding the full range of women’s human potentialities and abilities” (Biehl 1991, p. 15). “The use of metaphors of women as ‘nurturing’ – like the earth, and of the earth as female abound are regressive rather than liberating women” (Biehl 1991, pp. 17-19). They only reinforce stereotypes.

What these arguments seem to overlook is that concepts of nature, culture and gender are “historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and time periods” (Agarwal 1992, p. 123). This essentialism presents women as a homogeneous category, both within countries and across nations. It “fails to differentiate among women by class, race, ethnicity and so on” (Agarwal 1992, p. 122).

Ecofeminist essentialism fails to put forward any account of historical change in society. Critics like Susan Prentice (1998) argue that emphasizing the special relationship of women with nature and politics imply that what men do to the earth is bad, unlike women, thereby ignoring the fact that men too can develop an ethic of caring for nature. It also fails to analyse capitalism and its domination of nature. Hence, it cannot develop an effective strategy for change, since it ends in polarizing the worlds of men and women while essentializing the two categories. On the other hand, ecofeminists working within the socialist framework, look upon nature and human nature as “socially constructed, rooted in an analysis of race, class and gender” (Merchant 1992, p. 194). It has the potential for a more thorough critique of the domination issue. Going beyond the radicals, this ecofeminism puts forward a critique of capitalist patriarchy, focusing on the dialectical relationships between “production and reproduction, and between production and ecology” (Merchant 1992, pp. 195-197).

Historically, women’s intimate knowledge of nature has helped to sustain life. With colonial intervention and capitalist development, production in traditional

societies was disrupted. It resulted in a capitalistic economy dominated by men in charge of production of exchange commodities, while women were pushed increasingly into the domestic sphere, responsible mainly for reproducing the work-force and social relations. Under the capitalistic system, reproduction is subordinate to production, and the sustainability of nature is ignored. Under socialism, however, production is to satisfy people's need, not people's greed. According to this ecofeminist view, in the transition to socialist ecology, the priorities of capitalism would be reversed with emphasis on reproduction and nature, rather than production being central. Thus reproduction of life itself becomes the focus of these ecofeminists. This view deals mainly with environmental issues that affect working class women. However, these ecofeminists too tend to essentialize women and perceive them as being closer to nature. Furthermore, they tend to see women as one of the marginalized categories along with the different marginalized races and classes. But in doing so, they homogenize the category of women. They fail to see that the experiences of women differ on the basis of their caste, class, race, and ethnicity and so on. Despite these limitations, the ecofeminists working within the socialist framework have much more potential than the other two ecofeminist perspectives, in analyzing the link between gender and environment.

Ecofeminism & Its Critics in India

In India, the most visible advocate of ecofeminism is Vandana Shiva. One would tend to categorize her work with the ecofeminists of the radical mode, but her critique of the entire development model and its effects on the environment, places her more among the ecofeminists of the socialist framework. Vandana Shiva (1988) critiques modern science and technology as a western, patriarchal and colonial project, which is inherently violent and perpetuates this violence against women and nature. Pursuing this model of development has meant a shift away from traditional Indian philosophy, which sees *prakriti* as a living and creative process, the "feminine principle", from which all life arises. Under the garb of development, nature has been exploited mercilessly and the feminine principle was no longer associated with activity, creativity and sanctity of life, but was considered passive and as a "resource". This has led to marginalization, devaluation, displacement and ultimately the dispensability of women. Women's special knowledge of nature and their dependence on it for "staying alive", were systematically marginalized under the onslaught of modern science. Shiva, however, notes that Third World women are not simply victims of the development process, but also possess the power for change. She points to the experiences of women in the Chipko movement of the 1970s in the Garhwal Himalayas – where women struggled for the protection and regeneration of the forests.

Through her analysis, Shiva points out the critical links between the different development perspectives, the process of change brought about by the development and its impact on the environment and the people dependent on it for their subsistence. Further, she argues with Maria Mies that whenever women have protested against ecological destruction or nuclear annihilation, they were "aware

of the connections between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature” (Mies 1993, p. 14). These movements were informed by the ecofeminist principles of connectedness, wholeness, inter-dependence and spirituality, in opposition to capitalist patriarchal science that is engaged in disconnecting and dissecting. It is argued that the ecofeminist position, i.e., a subsistence perspective, is rooted in the material base of everyday subsistence production of women the world over. This struggle of women and men to conserve their subsistence base can become the common ground for women’s liberation and preservation of life on earth.

However, some of the problems with Vandana Shiva’s argument are as follows: Shiva’s analysis (in *Staying Alive* 1988) relates to the study of rural women in Northwest India, but she tends to generalize her analysis to cover all Third World women. Gabriel Dietrich (1990, 1992) points out that Shiva seems to presuppose a society that is democratically organized, where people own sufficient land to survive on its produce. She seems to treat caste factors and political options as non-existent and neglects the realities of hierarchies, subordination, patriarchy and violence within traditional tribal and peasant communities. Like the western ecofeminists, she implicitly essentializes Third World women and sees them as being closer to nature. Besides, the notions of “Shakti” and “Prakriti” are posed as representative of Indian philosophy as a whole. However, the “feminine principle” is largely expressed in Hindu terms which are close to Sankhya philosophy, which is mainly popular in the North. Dietrich wonders what the “feminine principle” would imply for Dalits, tribals, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and other minority communities. Furthermore, Shiva does not analyse religious controls over women, when she discusses the “shakti” aspects of religion.

Meera Nanda (1991) in a scathing attack on Vandana Shiva, brands her a typical neo-populist scholar, who has tried to portray the “West” as inherently vicious and the “Third World” as fundamentally virtuous. She rebukes Shiva for branding modern science as western, inherently masculine (therefore destructive) and just another social construct. Shiva attributes the degradation of nature and the subordination of women mainly to the country’s colonial history and the imposition of a western model of development. She, however, ignores the pre-existing inequalities of caste, class, power, privilege and property relations that predate colonialism. In advocating the ecofeminist principles of women’s special relationship with nature, connectedness, wholeness and so on, Shiva and Mies ignore the question of who acquires what knowledge and how or whether at all, it is articulated.

Property relations play a major role in the way in which women and men relate to their environments. In patrilineal societies, women do not have primary rights to land. Their rights to land are mediated through their male relatives. The gap between legal and actual land ownership rights, patrilocal marriages, the segregation of public space and social interaction by age, class and gender, female illiteracy, high fertility, as well as male control over agricultural technology and dissemination of information put women farmers at a disadvantage (Agarwal 1994, p. 475; Jackson 1993, p. 409). Thus women would probably not be inclined to undertake long-term conservation practices. In land cultivated by women as part of

family duties and as use of common property resources (CPR), the conservation practices adopted, do not necessarily reflect women's special knowledge of conservation, as they may be dictated by men. It is usually pointed out that women's relation to the environment is influenced by requirements of "sustenance", unlike men who exploit the environment for cash (Shiva 1988, pp. 86-87). However, studies show that this is questionable, since women also use the CPRs for fuelwood, fruits etc., for sale in the market. In fact, men use CPRs in more subsistence oriented ways. Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan (1991), in their study of the Jharkhand region in Central India, point out that the division of labour between men and women is determined by culturally influenced gender roles rather than sex roles influenced by biology. Through their study they show that women, besides gathering, also took part in hunting. Men also take part in gathering of food in foraging societies.

Alternate Conceptions: Feminist Environmentalism

In discussing the pros and cons of ecofeminism, one would like to advocate Bina Agarwal's "feminist environmental" perspective. The perspective is rooted in material reality and sees the relation between women and nature as structured by gender and class (caste/race) organization of production, reproduction and distribution. As Bina Agarwal points out (1992), women's relation to the environment is socially and historically variable. Women, particularly in poor rural households, are both victims of environmental degradation as well as active agents in movements for the protection and regeneration of the environment. They act in both positive and negative ways with the environment. The unquestioning acceptance of woman-nature link and the idea that, since women are most severely affected by environmental degradation, they have "naturally" positive attitudes towards environmental conservation is, therefore, unacceptable.

The forests and village commons provide a wide range of essential items such as food, fuel, fodder, manure, building material, medicinal herbs, resin, gum, honey and so on, for rural households in India as well as in much of Asia and Africa. For the poor, village commons (VC) are a vital source of fuel and fodder. Ninety-one percent of their firewood needs and more than 69 percent of their fodder needs are met by VCs (Agarwal 1992). Access to VCs reduces inequalities in income among poor and non-poor households. The forests are an important source of livelihood, particularly for tribal populations. Studies have shown that nearly 30 million people in India depend on forests and forest produce to a large extent (Kulkarni 1983). The dependence on forests is much more during lean agricultural seasons and famines or droughts. Class differences are once again highlighted in the dependency on and accessibility to water resources for irrigation and drinking. While for a large percentage of poorer households, water is used directly from rivers and streams, richer households sink deep wells and tube-wells, and tap groundwater for drinking and irrigation.

The growing degradation of natural resources, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the increasing appropriation by the state and by private individuals, as well as the decline in communally-owned property, have been primarily

responsible for the increased class-gender effect of environmental degradation. Besides, the decline in “community resource management systems, the increase in population and the mechanization of agriculture, resulting in the erosion of local knowledge systems, have aggravated the class-gender implications of the environmental degradation” (Agarwal 1992).

With the disappearance of forests, VCs, shortage of drinking water and so on, women have to spend more time and walk longer distances to get fuel, fodder, food and water. Drying up or pollution of wells accessible to lower-caste women have meant an increased dependence on upper-caste women to dole out water to them. This has increased the burden on women and young girls and has ever led to increasing cases of suicide among them. (Bahuguna 1984; Shiva 1988). The degradation of forests and the historical and ongoing malpractices and state policies and increasing privatization have restricted the access of villagers to forests and VCs. It has reduced the number of items that women could gather from forests and VCs which has directly resulted in reduced incomes. The extra time spent in gathering has reduced the time available to women for crop production, where they are the main cultivators, as in the hill regions due to high male outmigration (Agarwal 1992). The little women earn through selling firewood is also reduced due to deforestation. This has a direct impact on the diets of poor households. The decline in the availability of fruits, berries and so on, as well as firewood has forced people of poor households to shift to less nutritious food and eat half-cooked meals or even reduce the number of meals eaten per day. The existing gender biases within the family lead to women and female children getting secondary treatment with regard to food and health care. Given the kind of task a poor rural women do, such as working in the rice fields, fetching water, washing clothes, etc., they are more exposed to water-borne diseases and to polluted water bodies (Mencher-Sardamoni 1982). It is also women who are mainly responsible for the care of the sick within the family.

The displacement of people due to large dams, or large scale deforestation, etc., has led to the disruption of social support networks within and between villages. Women, particularly of poor, rural households, who depend to a large extent on such networks for economic and social support, are adversely affected (Sharma 1980). It has also eroded a whole way of life and has resulted in alienation and helplessness (Fernandes-Menon 1987). Old people and widows or deserted women are most neglected. The dominant forms of development have led to a devaluation and marginalization of women’s indigenous knowledge and skills which they have acquired through their everyday interaction with nature. Simultaneously, they are not trained to use the new technologies and are excluded from the planning process. With degradation and privatization of natural resources, the material base of women’s knowledge is declining.

Krishna (2009) points out that the gender perspective involves more than a “women’s angle” on environmental issues. Highlighting the Bankura project, she argues that if women obtain more control over the material basis and the processes of production as well as their own labour, they would be well prepared for changes under India’s new economic policies. She believes that women’s participation in environmental movements and activities will lead to their empowerment.

Indian Environment Movement

I would now like to take a brief look at the Indian environmental movement, past and present. Through this brief history, I would like to show how caste, class and gender issues have been involved in these movements. The Indian environmental movement is kaleidoscopic in nature (Krishna 1996), representing various points of view. The different ideological streams identified by Ramachandra Guha (1988) are Crusading Gandhian, Ecological Marxist, Appropriate Technology and, more recently, Scientific Conservation and Wilderness Enthusiasts (Gadgil-Guha 1995). Common to all these streams is the acknowledgement of the failure of the present development model. But there is no consensus on possible alternatives. The Crusading Gandhians reject the modern way of life and invoke Gandhi's notion of "Ram Rajya", i.e., a return to the pre-colonial, pre-capitalist village society. They consider modern science responsible for all the country's problems. They advocate an alternative non-modernist philosophy rooted in Indian tradition.

The ecological Marxists, influenced by Marxist philosophy, see the unequal access to resources as the basic problem in society. They are most closely identified with the People's Science Movement and are now advocating environmental protection. They are against tradition, and emphasize the confrontational movements. For them, modern science is indispensable for building a new society. Falling between these two streams are the Appropriate Technologists. With regard to modern science, they are pragmatic, arguing for a synthesis of traditional and modern technological knowledge systems. Though they recognize the existence of socio-economic hierarchies, they do not clearly tackle them. The Scientific Conservationists draw attention to the increasing degradation of land and water. The Wilderness Enthusiasts highlight the decline of natural forests, plant and animal species and demand a total ban on human society in protected areas. Though neither of the above has a popular following, they have considerable influence on government policy. Both the streams look to the state for solutions to environmental problems. However, both groups overlook the socio-economic roots of environmental degradation. They are seen more as "élite" environmentalists.

The Indian environmental movement represents a wide spectrum of social conflicts over dwindling natural resources. It has grown rapidly over the past two decades and represents conflicts localized within villages or spread across large areas involving large number of people. The proliferation of voluntary groups working within the environmental movement, are mainly concerned with activities that destroy the environment and impoverish local communities: large dams on rivers, mining in hills, mechanized fishing in the coastal regions, commercial agriculture or destruction of forests. However, this vibrant environmental movement is more a "defensive" movement. It has not questioned the larger socio-political processes responsible for ecological deterioration and has failed to contribute to the major debates on development policy.

The environment movement in India has a very long history that goes well into India's past. In the first two decades after independence, environmental conflicts were muted. In the past two to three decades, however, there has been a sharpening of conflicts. They cut across caste, class and gender and pit the haves against the have-nots, the poor against the poor, as well as the rich against the rich. India has witnessed a number of popular movements to protect community rights over natural resources that began with the famous Chipko movement in the Garhwal Himalayas in the 1970s and got global publicity with the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement).

Forest conflicts have a long history in India going back to British times. For the peasants, tribals, artisans, etc., free access to forest produce was vital for their economic survival. The largely commercial interests of the colonizers led to an intensification of social conflict between the State and its subjects. In the post-independence period, too, conflicts between the state and the people have persisted due to the lopsided development policies of the state.

The emergence of the Indian environmental movement can perhaps be dated to 1973, when the famous Chipko movement began in the central Himalayas. The Chipko movement emerged as a protest against granting of permission for access to the forests to commercial timber operators, while the local people were refused access to the forests for making agricultural implements. The movement which spread rapidly to other villages saw the active involvement of women. They worked jointly with the men of their community, and in some cases even against them, when they differed with them over the use of forest resources. Women were more concerned with the long-term gain of saving the forests and environment, and hence, subsistence and survival issues, rather than short-term gain through commercial projects like monoculture forests, potato-seed farms, etc. The scope of the movement broadened and involved issues of male alcoholism, domestic violence, women's representation in village councils, as well as against mining in the hills. It helped women recognize the inter-connections between nature and human sustenance. The movement was carried forward largely by women using Gandhian techniques of protest. Much has been written about the Chipko movement (Bandhyopadhyay-Shiva 1987), and women's involvement in it is celebrated by some feminist scholars (Shiva 1988) as an expression of women's special relation to nature. However, scholars like Shobhita Jain (1984), Ramachandra Guha (1989), Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha (1992), have argued that it should be seen in the context of the peasant struggle of the region.

The 1970s also witnessed a number of forest-based conflicts in the tribal areas of Bihar, Orissa, MP, Maharashtra and AP. There have also been local level struggles by village artisans faced with depleting forest resources. But they have yet to be politically organized (Gadgil-Guha 1995). Conflicts have arisen over the sharing of water resources, as over the use of the Cauvery waters between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, pitting the rich against the rich. The overuse of groundwater resources has pitted the upper castes and classes as in Gujarat and Karnataka (Gadgil-Guha 1995).

In India, where 90 percent of the population is dependent on land, the decline of traditional crafts and failure to implement the reform policies have left the large

majority of the peasantry impoverished, and increased the pressure on land. With the Green Revolution, agricultural production has been boosted in limited areas, but it has also resulted in long-term environmental degradation. In these areas, a new class of large and medium sized landholders has been created, leaving the large majority of the rural poor impoverished. Simultaneously, lack of employment opportunities in the industrial sector, has pushed the rural poor to encroach on common lands, forests etc., leading to conflicts with landowners, forest administrators, etc. In the urban areas, the value of urban land has increased tremendously. The condition of the rural poor migrating to the cities is very dismal. The slums they live in become areas of contention as estate developers want to use the land for the expansion of the city.

Besides land, conflicts over water have been widespread. A small minority try to capture water resources through dams, leading to the large majority losing access to cultivable land. One of the little-known but important conflicts was the Mulshi Satyagraha in 1920s against the building of a dam on the Western Ghats near Mumbai. This dam led to the submergence of cultivable and grazing land of the farmers, for which they were paid no compensation. The debate that ensued between the proponents and opponents of the dam was a precursor to the debates now on over the feasibility and usefulness of large dams and other such projects. The root of the debate is the conflict of interests between subsistence-oriented peasants and tribals on the one hand, and urban centres and industry, on the other. In the 1950s, the river-valley projects like the Bhakra-Nangal in Punjab, Tungabhadra on Andhra Pradesh-Karnataka border, the Rihand in U.P etc., met with little opposition, as tribals and peasants were expected to make sacrifices in the larger interests of the nation. However, the dismal condition of the displaced persons who had become “ecological refugees” (Gadgil-Guha 1995) led to growing and organized opposition to such river-valley projects in the 1970s. The opposition to the Tehri Dam in the Garhwal Himalayas, the Koel-Karo and Subarnarkha Dams in Bihar, and the Bhopalptnam-Inchampalli project on the Maharashtra-M.P. border has been strong from the peasants and tribals who stand to lose. In the Bedthi project in Karnataka, however, opposition came from the influential Brahman landlords whose lands were at stake. The Silent Valley projects in Kerala were shelved to save the rain forests of the region and not because any human community was to be affected. More recently, popular opposition to the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the river Narmada has grown in intensity. Considered the largest planned environmental disaster in the world, it involves the construction of over 3000 major and minor dams at the expense of more than Rs.25,000 crores (Sethi 1993). While the major beneficiaries of the dam are in Gujarat, the greatest displacement will be in Madhya Pradesh, where 193 of the 243 villages to be submerged lie. Sixty percent of those to be displaced are tribals (Baviskar 1995).

Opposition to the dam has come from those directly affected such as the tribals and peasants. In the protests against the lack of proper rehabilitation and compensation facilities, however, the rights of women to land have been overlooked. Though women have actively participated in the meetings and *dharnas* (demonstrations), they have been incompletely empowered. The lack of feminist

perspective to the movement has meant that issues important to women have been sidelined (Krishna 1996). The movement has a wide supportive network of activist groups led by Medha Patkar, Baba Amte and others working in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and elsewhere, as well as environmental groups overseas. They successfully campaigned to stop World Bank funding for the dam. However, there is a strong counter-movement of rich farmers, builders and others, who stand to gain most from the project. There is also growing State repression against anti-dam activists. The dam continued to be built. The Narmada movement petitioned the Supreme Court to stop the project. The Court ordered a temporary halt in the construction in 1995, but in 1999 allowed the raising of the height of the dam. The movement got a lot of support not only from the *adivasis* (indigenous people) directly affected by the dam but also from the “metropolitan causeratti” middle class, urban-based supporters like writers, journalists, filmmakers, academics and others (Baviskar 2005).

Another major focus of the environmental movement has been to check air and water pollution with the help of state legislation and enforcement agencies. However, in India, industrial pollution has largely gone unchecked because laws are not enforced and offenders bribe corrupt officials to look the other way. The worst industrial disaster was the Bhopal Gas tragedy of 1984 which killed nearly 3,000 people and maimed another 50,000. Conflicts over fishing between traditional fisherfolk and the modern trawlers are intensifying in Kerala and other coastal regions. The proposal to set up a shrimp farming project in Chilka Lake in Orissa by the industrial house of Tatas, has been widely opposed. Students have joined hands with the rural peasantry and fisherfolk to stop the project, as it would mean a decline in the availability of fish, increased danger of floods, waterlogging and disturbance of the ecological diversity. Conflicts have arisen over the consequences of mining on the environment and on subsistence agriculture, as in the Doon Valley in northwest India since 1947, in the Gandhamardan hills of Sambalpur district in Orissa since 1983, and so on. Another category of conflicts is over the protection of sacred groves, wildlife sanctuaries, etc. Here the conflict is mainly between the recreational, aesthetic and religious interests of one group against the economic interests of another. This brief review of struggle over environmental issues points to the fact that Indian environmentalism very much involves the poor, disadvantaged sections of the population, the lower castes and women. Caste, class and gender issues are the material base of the interaction between people and the environment. Without considering political-economy issues, ecofeminism would remain limited and partial. In order to see if the issue of environment has led to any kind of debate within the women’s movement, I will review briefly the women’s movement in India. The attempt is to show how the women’s movement would become broader based if environment and development issues concerning women of different castes and classes were taken up.

Women’s Movement in India

In the first phase of their movement in the pre-Independence era, women were mainly involved with the national liberation struggle. Women’s organizations

essentially focused on constitutional equality and amendments to Hindu laws. With the achievement of Independence, a period of lull ensued. The mid-1960s witnessed economic crisis, stagnation, inflation and increasing lawlessness. There was general discontent and displeasure in society, especially among the youth and the working class.

All over India, in the mid-sixties and the early seventies, there were student protests, anti-price rise *morchas*, tribal revolts, the Naxalbari movement and so on. Women participated in large numbers in these movements. As a result of the mid-sixties crisis, the 1970s witnessed a resurgence of the women's movement. A number of autonomous women's groups emerged that questioned the development plans and policies and put forward gender equality as an operative principle.

Some of the major debates that engaged the women's movement were issues of women's oppression, violence against women, the campaign for women's rights that challenged the dichotomy between public and private sphere and the social, cultural, economic and political manifestations of "gender". The debate over growth, development and equity issues from a woman's perspective have thrown new light on the dimensions and causes of gender inequality.

The women-and-development debate has highlighted the adverse impact of modernization and technological innovations on women's work and income, effects of migration, increase in female-headed households, exploitative conditions in the unorganized sector and in the free-trade zone industries (Bannerjee 1991; Kalpagam 1994), impact of environmental degradation, and so on. Issues of peripheral groups of tribals, poor, landless, rural and urban women also gained recognition. This led to an extended debate over what constituted "work" and "non-work". Whether housework was to be considered "productive" and whether women were exploited and oppressed within the household. Discussions have also begun over the origins and development of women's oppression.

Participation of women in the protest policies of the late 1970s and 1980s and the emergence of autonomous women's groups led to debates over issues of gender inequality, women's oppression and exploitation. The Mathura rape case led to the mobilization of women on a large scale against sexual oppression of women. Increasing dowry murders also led to debates over the issue of violence against women within the family and thus to the "questioning of the entire conceptualization of family and the ideological dimension of women's oppression" (Sharma 1992, p. 7).

Increasing fundamentalism and communalism and emerging ideologies on women in relation to religion are now issues of great concern. The Third National Conference on Women's Studies (1986) "stressed the need to look at relationship between religion and patriarchy" (Sharma 1992, p. 19). Communal violence on women has led to the examination of interlinkages between patriarchy, religion and politics as basis of women's oppression and subordination.

Since the 1980s the scope of "environmental activities" by Hindu communal forces has increased. The Hindutva political agenda is expressed by environmental issues being woven into the popular discourse (Sharma 2012).

Conclusion

Issues of environment and ecology entered the mainstream discourse on development and social movements only after the Conference on Environment and Development, at Stockholm in 1972. It highlighted the differential rates of consumption of natural resources by the developed and Third World countries, i.e., issues of global political economy. There have been many struggles, as highlighted earlier, in the context of modernization of agriculture, indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources, against large, multi-purpose dams and river-valley schemes, against pollution of air and water and so on. Although women participated in these struggles, these were not seen as women's movements.

At the individual level, however, there has been much debate and discussion, especially with Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, as discussed earlier. On the whole, environmental concerns have not been issues for theoretical debate within the Indian women's movement. The women's movement in India has to a large extent been preoccupied with issues of urban-based women. It would, in fact, become more broad-based if the category "women" was not treated as a homogeneous category and environmental issues relating to women of different regions, classes and castes were taken up.

Protest movements against environmental destruction and struggles for survival highlight the fact that caste, class and gender issues are deeply enmeshed in it. It is the poor, lower class and lower caste, and within them, the peasant and tribal women, who are worst, affected and hence, they are the most active in the protests. Women, therefore, cannot be homogenized into the category (as the ecofeminists tend to do), either within the country or across the globe.

Women as women have a special relationship with nature as ecofeminists argue, is proved wrong when one analyses the various protest movements. Women's interaction with nature and their responses to environmental degradation must be analysed and located within the material reality of gender, caste class and race-based division of labour, property and power. Women are victims of environmental degradation as well as active agents in the regeneration and protection of the environment. The adverse class-gender effects of these processes are reflected in the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems and livelihood strategies on which poor, rural women depend.

The nature and impact of the processes of environmental degradation and the appropriation of natural resources by a small minority are based in the dominant ideas about development, gender division of labour, as well as on differentials of property, power and so on. Hence, there is growing opposition to such inequality and environmental degradation, as reflected in widespread grassroots resistance movements. The dominant development paradigm and short-term solutions to development problems are implicitly questioned by these movements. These movements highlight the interconnections of class, caste and gender issues in it. In fact, one would like to argue, that the women's movement must take up environmental issues that impinge on the survival strategies of a vast majority of women from different castes, classes and race backgrounds. This would help to broad base the movement. On the whole, what is needed is a total change, relating

to development, redistribution and institutional structures. Environment and gender issues need to be taken together and the new social movements in India seem to provide the ray of hope for change.

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