RELATING ECO-FEMINISM WITH WOMEN ISSUES OF BANJAR AREA OF KULLU DISTRICT IN HIMACHAL PRADESH, INDIA

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Abstract

Though textually women of Vedic India seem to enjoy a high status in terms of honour and respect as we find references to their participation in 'Yagyas' and 'Swyamvers' in mythological writings (where marriage has been designated as sacrosanct) but contemporary India has witnessed their subjugation revealed by the popular feminist writings of Vandana Shiva and Bina Agarwal. The western feminists' debates and taxonomies have dominated the global perspectives on women's studies with their variability but there is uniformity in the understanding of feminism in very diverse cultures of the global South. This paper tries to relate the popular concept of eco-feminism with contemporary issues in the context of an isolated valley area of Banjar which conserves the traditional Kullu culture of Himachal Pradesh. It will also critically try to analyze the role of the Government in women's empowerment and the actual ground conditions.

Keywords: Eco-feminism, global south, gender discrimination, women empowerment.

Introduction:

Cultures[1] through ages have shaped the lives of women. There are mythological referencesthat show that equal social and religious status and equal opportunity for advanced education were given to boys and girls during the *Vedic* period. But during the post-Vedic period women lost that identity, independence and status. She became a subject of protection. The 'ideal female' idea can be traced back to the rules laid down by Manu the progenitor of the Hindu race in 200 B.C. He stated that a woman should be kept day and night in subordination by males of the family (Prakash, 2003). Some of the common blessings in Hindu society still prevalent are *'Dudho nahao puto falo'* (bathe with milk and bless with sons), *'Shat Putro bhava, Putra vati bhav'* (may you be the mother of a hundred sons or bless with a son). Even the blessings seem to be prejudiced. For ages, the division of labour and status accorded to women and men in society are determined by sex. Thus, the subjugation of women or gender discrimination became a considerable problem within Indian society. The practiceslike Sati, child marriage, dowry, purdah, etc. gradually became a part of the culture. The traditional patriarchal society in India has placed women in secondary status. Their work involved domestic chores, managing cultivation, animals and other stringent activities. This has affected their health, education, independence and participation. In most rural India, women are malnourished (since in the family they are the last members to eat) and are rarely allowed medical care. The inheritance laws are also biased as among Hindus, the property is generally held by men, usually fathers and passed on to sons, to the total exclusion of women (Mukhopadhyay, 1998 in Kabeer, 1999). These laws prevent women from financial stability

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[1]By culture,we mean shared learned behaviours and values of a particular group that are transmitted across generations (Ridley, Li & Hill, 1998).

and hence increase their dependence on males. Gendering starts with the birth of a child and lasts throughout life. The birth of a son is celebrated and he gets all the love, respect and care from the family and society. Boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing while girls are discouraged which makes them homebound and shy.

The discrimination against women and their status in Indian society is assessed by statistics that in India males significantly outnumber females. The sex ratio according to the 2011 census (provisional figures) stands at 940 as compared to 933 per 1000 males in 2001. In Himachal, this ratio is 974 per 1000 males. Though it has improved but the real problem lies in the fact that in the age group 0-6 this gap is increasing.   In 1961, there were 978 females per 1000 male children in the 0-6 age group but by 2011, the figure has declined to 914 females per 1000 male children (Census, 2011).This is highlighted by some of the media reports which have strongly focussed on it 'More Indian Girls Go Missing, a 2011 Census Says'……'The country's 2011 census reveals that families are aborting female foetuses in larger numbers' (Crossette, 2011).This is clearer by the Global Gender Gap Index for 2010 where India ranks 112 out of 134 countries in the World Economic Forum (Kishwar, 2011). This has happened because of gender-selective abortions or the deaths of female infants. In an interview A.R. Nanda in New Delhi (who has been head of the Indian census commission, secretary of health and family welfare and most recently executive director of the independent Population Foundation of India) said that 'there is an unfortunate relationship between a declining fertility rate and the widening sex ratio'…….Sex selection in India has grown with the wider availability of ultrasound machines………. The use of ultrasound is illegal in India, but the law has been widely flouted. …..As secretary of health (the top permanent professional position in the ministry) he sent decoys into clinics to prove his point, and several practitioners were arrested (Crossette, 2011). Out of the total population, 120 million are women who live in abject poverty. The maternal mortality rate in rural areas is among the world's highest. From a global perspective, India accounts for 19% of all live births and 27% of all maternal deaths. The deaths of young girls in India exceed those of young boys by over 300,000 each year and every 6th infant death is specifically due to gender discrimination. Only 65.46 percent of Indian women are literate as compared to 82.14 percent of men (Census, 2011). In fact, gender has been the most statistically significant determinant of malnutrition among young children and malnutrition is a frequent, direct, or underlying, cause of death among girls below age 5. Girls are breastfed less frequently and for a shorter duration in infancy. Adult women consume approximately 1,000 fewer calories per day than men according to one estimate. Nutritional deprivation further causes anaemia and restricts their growth.

The reasons include the Hindu custom of a son's lighting a parent's funeral pyre, the (illegal) dowry custom where parents pay high costs to marry off their girls, etc.

Government role:

For women's empowerment and removing gender discrimination, Indian Government has encouraged women's education and their participation in local governance. This came in the form of the 1993 amendment to the Indian Constitution which reserved 1/3 rd of the elected

seats to the local governing bodies for women. The second major step was the passing of the Pre-natal Diagnostic Tech Act in 1994. The Government also announced the National policy for the empowerment of women in 2001 to bring out advancement, development and empowerment of women. Among Hindus, the property is generally passed on from fathers to sons, to the total exclusion of women (Mukhopadhyay, 1998) but among Muslims, though women have always enjoyed the right to inherit property as individuals but men inherit twice the share of women. Hindu law was reformed after Indian independence to give men and women equal rights of inheritance. The reform of personal law in India applies only to the majority Hindu community so that Muslim inheritance principles remain intact. The fact is that despite these differences in the customary and legal positions of women in the two communities, both Muslim and Hindu women remain effectively propertyless. For Hindu women, older norms and customs remain powerful and Agarwal (1994) provides evidence of the difficulties faced when they seek legal help over customary practices around land inheritance. Muslim women, on the other hand, generally prefer, or are encouraged to prefer, to waive their rights to parental property in favour of their brothers with the result that they, too, are treated as effectively property less. In this context Das Gupta (1987:92) has pointed out in the *jat* kinship system in Punjab that there was no question of women owning land. If she should insist on her right to inherit land equally under civil law, she would stand a good chance of being murdered.

Some of the schemes for women empowerment by the government of Himachal are the Monthly Pension Scheme for Widow and Destitute Women, Matri Shakti Bima Yojna for women living below the poverty line and belonging to IRDP families, Support of Training and Employment Programme (STEP), Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Women Development Corporation and Indira Mahila Yojna, etc. Himachal has increased reservation from 33% to 50% in Panchayats, Nagar Panchayats and Nagar Parishad and has become the third state after Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh to give 50% reservation to women in panchayats and local bodies. Three separate bills were introduced to bring about the amendment– Himachal Pradesh Panchayati Raj (Amended) Bill, 2008, Himachal Pradesh Nagar Palika (Amended) Act and Himachal Pradesh Municipal Corporation (Amended) Act. The Himachal Pradesh State Commission for Women (Amendment) Bill, 2008 was also passed. Himachal Pradesh is ranked third in the Women Empowerment Index among 16 major states of the country calculated by using the variables like female literacy rate; girls' enrolment rate; girls' drop-out rate; antenatal and post-natal care; institutional deliveries; nutritional anaemia in women; women life expectancy; crime against women; female child labour; women members in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha; female work participation rate; and effective wage rate for all wage work for females (Jharta).

Eco-Feminism:

If we talk about women's empowerment most of the dominant themes related to gender are also associated with feminism. The concept of feminism is considered fuzzy at times and 'Empowerment' itself comes from the power which lacks clarity and is one of the most

contested concepts in the social sciences (Rowlands, 1997 in Kabeer, 1999). The gender issue is still marginalized in India as evidenced by the fact that only one of the resolutions expressly mentions protecting women's rights (as part of workers' rights) (Ghosh, 2005). (Kishor, 1997in Kabeer, 1999) has defined empowerment of women in terms of control over key aspects of their lives defined in relation to resources (earnings and expenditures), self-reliance (can women support themselves without the support of their husband), decision making (final say about a variety of issues) and choice (choosing own spouse or being consulted in the choiceof a marriage partner). The 'Empowerment of Women' in its simplest form means empowering women socially, economically and politically so that they can break away from male domination and claim equality with men. It also refers to the increase in women's accessto the structures of the decision-making process which have otherwise been dominated by men (Sharma, 1998:3 in Jharta,). It means to do away with 'subordination', 'discrimination' and 'injustice' done to them in a male-dominated society (Jharta). However, the notion of empowerment is never understood clearly and a number of issues remain unspecified. The role of men in the processes of women's empowerment and the need for a change in their attitude are barely dealt with in literature. Though feminists have focussed that in all societies women have been denied the choice to a far greater extent than men and had less say in key areas of their lives. Feminist concerns with empowerment have translated into a variety of practical interventions. They have addressed many issues like women's rights, literacy, health awareness, violence against women, etc. through campaigns and different programmes. Batliwala (1994:131) refers that men stand to gain as well as lose from women's empowerment…. Women empowerment means the loss of the privileged position that patriarchy allotted to men . . . however . . . women empowerment also liberates and empowers men, both in material and psychological terms . . . they have lost not merely traditional privileges, but also traditional burdens.

Webster's New World Dictionary (1978) defined feminism as "The principle that women should have political, economic, and social rights equal to those of men," and "the movement to win such rights for women" (p. 514). Feminism itself remains debated as some people believe that women should not have rights equal to those of men (Worell, 1996). The source of women's oppression[2] lies in institutional male dominance. It also lies in the hierarchical structures that deprive women of all social locations of their respect, freedom, and equality.

From the various social movements, the feminist, peace, ecology and green - in the late 1970s and early 1980s the concept of eco-feminism emerged. Though the term was first used by Francoise D'Eaubonne it became popular only in the context of numerous protests and activities against environmental destruction. Given by Western Feminist Scholars, is a conceptual framework that basically says since women and nature have been dominated, oppressed and exploited by men, women are closer to nature and that they have a greater say in ending oppression of nature (Warren,1990).It takes from the green movement a concern

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[2]A systematic denial of access to valued community resources to members of groups defined as inferior or undeserving. It creates an unhealthy environment that often produces illness and decreased well-being.

about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women (Mellor, 1997).

Vandana Shiva speaks from the third world has raised her voice against the Western Industrial- Development Model that is responsible for the destruction of the environment and the oppression of women in the Third World. There are inherent inequalities in world structures that permit the North to dominate the South. Women were the first to protest against environmental destruction as they are more closely dependent on nature for their sustenance and the destruction of nature is the destruction of their livelihoods. It is this Industrial Developmental Model of the West that radically brought an end to the Indian cosmological view of nature – The *Prakriti* and *Purusha* who in balance create the world, instead of giving way to male dominance over passive nature. With the death of the *Prakriti* (feminine principle) began the domination and marginalization of women (Shiva, 1988). Bina Agarwal situates herself in South Asia and talks about Feminist Environmentalism that one needs to explore the relationship between men and women with the environment to gauge the relationship between gender and environment. Because society is subjected to gender and class-based division of labor, property, skill attainment, etc, the structure of people's interaction with nature is also gendered and class-based, which further structures the effects of environmental degradation likewise. And Because Women of certain classes depend more on nature for their immediate survival through functions of collecting fuel, fodder and food, they are the ones to be more affected by any changes in the environment. She takes the example of rural India where poor people depend on village commons which are increasingly affected by environmental degradation, the process of urbanization and privatization which has led to the loss of access, pollution, and erosion of traditional systems of knowledge, further leading to adverse effects on poor households who directly depend on these. But such an effect has critical gender dimensions because of the gendered division of labor and gender inequalities in access to critical productive resources. And these gender effects are mediated by class and vary regionally. Mostly these adverse effects of environmental degradation have been on time, income, nutrition, health, social networks and indigenous knowledge of women. There have been responses from the state as well as the grassroots. The grassroots, mainly the victims of degradation, have played the role of critical agents of change by resisting further harm to the environment. The author gives the examples of *Chipko* movement where people resisted cutting of trees, commercialisation of forest etc. It was here that their mobilisation also came handy to fight domestic violence and alcoholism and thus securing themselves from abuse. Thus, the author argues that there isn't any feminine sensibility that they are more connected to nature but it's contextualised within the material reality of survival and livelihood that makes women, that too of a particular class, to be closer to nature. So, there is a linkage between gender and environment. It would then be interesting to explore how the linkages change when we destabilise these relationships.

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Relating Eco-feminism with contemporary women issues of Banjar:

Banjar is a place where women and nature are very closely associated. The status of women though textually seems to be high in the entire Kullu belt as written by Dr. Surat Ram Thakur (2007) in his novel (a true story and also a detailed study of Kullu culture) *'Harka'* (local panchayat) women are given the freedom to the extent that before marriage they can spend nights with their male counterparts which seems quite objectionable to Indian societal norms but at the same time when the question of choice arises then the protagonist Shorya is not allowed to marry an outsider. This happens as the *devta* (local deity) denies it. So, we can see that the practices are largely governed by the 'institution of *devta*'-the inherent culture, here the '*devtaJamlu'* of village Malana whose decision is final. Even a decision as personal asmarriage is decided by the *devta* in the novel. By surveying this area, it seems that the role of *devta* institution is very crucial in the entire Kullu belt including the Banjar area. The culture seems to be anthropocentric as we can note many times the sacrifices of goats for every petty reason, here the concept of *Purusha* and *Prakriti* can be connected where *Purusha* (masculine) seems to be dominating the *Prakriti* (feminine) or the *devta* (*Purusha/*ruler) is dominating the *Prakriti* (ruled). By interviewing some young girls in this area and talking about their problems I come to know about the fact that they are conditioned under culture to the extent that they do not even think of claiming their rights. Girls are not allowed the clothes of their choice at times their decisions and other matters are decided by the *devtas*. This may be the same for the males but not forced. Though because of government efforts women are getting education but most of them are restricted to domestic work and the work-related to managing animals. There are celebrations if a male child is born and the *devta* is invited to the house and a goat is sacrificed (considered sanctimonious in Kullu culture) but there is no such ritual when a girl is born. Most of the things associated with *devta* are performed by males or the *gurs* and women are not allowed. To a large extent, the condition of women is similar to in other parts of rural India but the role of *devta* is crucial.

Suggestions:

For the empowerment of women, a feminist perspective is required which discourages status hierarchies. Women's problems cannot be solved in isolation. A revolutionary social and institutional change in the system of patriarchy as a system of male privilege is required in Indian society. The role of men in the processes of women's empowerment is one that should be specified and understood. There is a need for men to change their attitude in the course of women's empowerment. Family is the unit from where empowerment starts so it is very important to change our ideology.

Nanda, the former census commissioner, talks about gender-sensitive policies which are the secret of Kerala's development and higher living standards. He says that Indians can look to the southern state of Kerala for a model which has maintained European-level fertility rates and allowed girls to live healthy lives and to be educated.

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