

EXPLORING THE NATURE-WOMEN INTERCONNECT IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

As humanity progressed with time, their relationship with Nature also underwent changes and their development became coterminous with the exploitation of resources available in Nature. '*Nature-as-usufruct*' became the dominant view in almost all the societies until the 1960s when environmental crisis attracted the attention of activists and academicians. By the 1970s, Green Politics centred on environmental concern became part of mainstream politics in the West. Around the same time, a new movement was also initiated that traced the parallel existing between the oppression and exploitation of Nature and women that added an altogether new perspective to any environmental discourse. The primary focus of this feminist approach was to engage more and more women in the conservation of the environment so that the development process becomes more inclusive and sustainable. This movement though popularized in the West, however, may trace its roots in different Indian schools of thought that connect femininity and Nature both in imagination and practice as sources of life and sustenance.

Key Words: Human-Nature relationship, development, environment, feminist, Indian tradition.

Introduction

The theme of human-Nature relationship has always been the focal point of any environmental discourse. According to **Glacken (1956)**, the relationship between humans and Nature may be approached from three different perspectives:

- i. Nature as a deterministic factor for humans influencing their social, cultural and economic development.
- ii. Humans as modifier of Nature using Nature to the fulfillment of their own benefits and survival.
- iii. Humans in harmonious relationship with Nature maintaining a perfect symbiotic equation.

With time, the theme of human-Nature relationship came to revolve around two fundamental issues:

- i. That exploitation of resources is inevitable for human survival and development in which humans shall take more than they give back. Consequently, an entropic situation would arise that would progressively make it more difficult to maintain social stability. This is because exploitation of resources is essentially competitive in nature and is a class-dominated process. Hence, the '*resourceful*' shall always have an upper hand in this matter.
- ii. That there is a hope for a better future which is based on the hope that ultimately morality shall prevail leading to a greater concern for the survival of the species and superseding narrow personal gains (**Dikshit, 1997**).

Since the process of human survival and cultural development of humanity rested on the exploitation of natural resources, the concept of '*Nature-as-usufruct*' became the dominant views of almost all societies with time. It was only in the 1960s that an alternate view of '*Nature-as-nurturer*' attracted the attention of academicians and activists in the west. Soon in the 1970s, with the shift of *Green Politics* from voluntary pressure groups to mainstream politics in the West, the concern for an ecologically balance earth gained heights. Around the same time, some analogy was being drawn between women and Nature; both as producers of life and both subject to oppression and exploitation. This gave rise to a distinct feminist perspective for any environmental discourse. Though popularized in the West, if explored, its roots may be traced in different Indian schools of thought.

The main objective of this article therefore, is to explore this connection of women with Nature specifically in the Indian context.

The Nature-Women Interconnect in the Indian Tradition

In India, femininity and Nature are intimately related both in imagination and in practice from two perspectives:

- i. As a life-giver.
- ii. As a source of sustenance.

The Indian cosmology puts the Universe to a constant cyclical process of creation and dissolution meant for re-creation. This entire process is driven by an enormous source of dynamic energy termed '*Shakti*.' The manifestation of this Shakti or energy is Nature or '*Prakriti*.' Therefore, Prakriti is a creator or life-giver and hence is feminine.

In Indian philosophy, particularly the 'Samkhya' school of thought, the root cause of the material world is this feminine principle of *Prakriti*. But *Prakriti* is extremely subtle and can be perceived only through its products (or the evolutes). The feminine principle in conjunction with the masculine principle that is the *Purusha* creates the world since *Purusha* is pure consciousness and the source of all knowledge. The products of *Prakriti* are meant for serving the *Purusha*. Hence, *Purusha* needs *Prakriti* for fulfillment and *Prakriti* needs *Purusha* to be known. Likewise, the environment surrounding us is comprised of a multitude of animate and inanimate objects that is collectively called the Nature (or *Prakriti*). Its existence can be perceived in the form of various natural resources that humanity (or *Purusha*) uses for its own survival and sustenance. Women's work in providing the basic needs of life and sustenance to the family members is similarly invisible.

The feminist perspective to environmentalism relies on a non-dualistic egalitarian society to make it more inclusive. This may find its roots in *Shaktism* that also speaks of the non-dualistic concept of '*ardhanarishwar*' (a divinely image of half man and half woman). *Shaktism* emphasizes on goddess (or *Shakti*) worship and by this, stresses on the importance of women. **Vandana Shiva** thus writes that Nature and women have mistakenly perceived as passive whereas they are *Shakti* and the source of immense power. By involving them in the development process, a more sustainable and productive approach may be achieved in contrast to the process of *maldevelopment* set in by capitalist patriarchy whose sole purpose is capital accumulation.

Conclusion

Though the feminist perspective to environmentalism may find its roots in different Indian schools of thought, it may be criticized as being too idealistic since it emphasizes on the mystical connection between nature and women rather than bringing forth their actual conditions and thus, in a way is deviated from reality. In short, the feminine principle is largely abstract in nature.

Moreover, all women may not be treated at par and differentiations might exist based on castes, class, ecological zones and so on. Also, the parallel drawn between women and Nature mostly pertains to Hinduism and hence may not be applicable for all religious persuasions as India is a home to people from multiple religious backgrounds. Finally, this view of environmentalism puts the entire onus of protecting and conserving the environment on women whereas it is the responsibility of the entire humanity and men should be equal partners in the process as well.

Nonetheless, it locates women and Nature as a source of life with the capacity to create and maintain life processes and challenges those processes and systems that threaten life on earth. The insight provided by this ideology of equating women and Nature is that “*women and Nature are associated not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life.*”

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