

Tribal Women and Sustainable Ecology

Need for Dialogue between Traditional Beliefs and Modernism

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1. Introduction

A study on 'Tribal Women and Forest Economy' by Fernandes and Menon, reveals that at every level of the forest dweller economy women contribute more to the forest economy than men do. Hence, women become the worst victims of deforestation process by virtue of their predominance in the forest dweller economy. Since deforestation essentially involves cutting down Minor Forest Produce (MFP) bearing fuel and fodder and reducing the area for shifting cultivation, the supply of food is also reduced, affecting the nutrition system. Consequently, women, the main agents of livelihood strategy and the main providers of food, also have to deal with the negative impact much more than men do (1987:157).

Against the above background any engagement with environmental studies would enquire whether women are the main agents of deforestation and ecological degradation by virtue of their involvement in the forest dweller economy. There are studies to show how the tribals, contrary to the popular myth of their being protectors of the forest, have indulged in its destruction. Baviskar's (1995) study of the tribals in the Narmada valley briefly mentions how the author's 'myth' of the tribals' traditional protection of forests was shattered during her fieldwork. In Jewitt's study also the ethnography of two tribal villages at Bero in the Ranchi district of Jharkhand, shows how women, despite repeated reminders to be careful in collecting fuel wood and other MFP, continued "felling saplings without thinking or, it seems, caring about which species they cut and whether or not they would regenerate" (2004:129).

The purpose of this paper is not a witch hunt so as to ascertain the responsibility for environmental degradation. Neither is it a romanticisation and essentialisation of the tribal women's role in ecological sustainability. Away from the domains of 'eco-feminism' and 'women, environment and development' (WED) generalisations (Jewitt 2004:112), the paper will explore some cultural mechanisms of the tribal women's

promotion of environmental concerns in and through her community and see the way in which modern technology and the knowledge system can be harnessed with traditional beliefs and practices.

2. Traditional Beliefs and Environmental Concerns

The world-view of the tribals provides a religious framework for the concrete manifestation of ecological conservation and sustainability. The clan-system or totemism and a holistic vision of humans and their interrelation with environment give conceptual clarity for a contextual application. The holistic and integrated approach to reality finds its expression in the tribal way of life and their natural surroundings, in their names and social institutions, in their rites and rituals, feasts and festivals, signs and symbols, etc.

2:1 Cultural Roots in Nature

The tribal habitat across the world is characterised by natural surroundings, undulating plateau, hills and mountains, rivers and streams, forests and valleys, and mines and waterfalls. They are invariably rich in flora and fauna with innumerable species of plants, birds, insects and animals. Tribals are forest dwellers who live in the midst of plants, trees, rocks, grass, birds, animals, (insects, rodents, snakes, reptiles etc.) rivers, fresh air and good sunshine. Their way of life is patterned according to the environment. Their agricultural activities are coterminous with the life cycle of the season. They have seasonal songs and dances. Nature is their best teacher. They are one with nature. This symbiosis with nature is the motivational force preventing them from violating the law of nature. The tribal world views the cosmos consisting of natural objects, birds, water, air, sunshine, human beings, etc., which are bound together to one another in an integral manner (Minz, 1993:67). Natural objects, vegetation, animals, etc. form part of their symbolic representation of the reality. The Oraons' symbol of *Biri*, the Sun, for instance, represents splendour, glory, power, fecundity and ultimately the *Dharmes* (the Oraon name for the Supreme Being) Himself. In the same way, *kefer*

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(winnowing basket), which is made out of bamboo, is considered as the seat of the village guardian, the *Chala Paccho* or the Lady of the Grove. The *bi* (egg), a sacrificial offering with neither head nor tail, self contained life, is an exalted symbol of life. The *karam* tree, a life symbol, is propitious to life and prosperity. The *tela* tree has a mythical association with destruction and is a symbol of evil and punishment. The *semar* tree has a mythical allusion to the origin of the evil spirits, and its virgin branch is used in the *Phagua* ritual (during the feast called *Phagua*) to signify total destruction of ills and misfortune and evil. The blood of animals such as *kher* (fowl), *chiyom* (chicks), *era* (goat), *kiss* (pig), etc., serve as substitutes for human life itself in the sacrifices, and are life symbols (Turkey, 1980:88-90).

2.2 Nomenclature

The tribal nomenclature is yet another manifestation of their closeness with nature. Their villages, localities and persons are named after natural objects: We find the names of the villages after trees, such as *Tetairtoli* (tamarind), *Pakritoli* or *Jitiyatoli* (Pipal), *Karamtoli* (the sacred Karam tree), *Aaamtoli* (mango), *Jaamtoli* (blackberry), etc.; after thorn and bush, e.g., *Kantadih*, *Jhargram*, *Jhantipahari*, etc. Places are named after mountains, e.g., *Paharpur*, *Burudih*, *Paharsara*, *Parhartoli*, *Alupahar*, etc. They are named after animals, e.g., *Baghlata* (tiger), *Hathimara* (elephant), *Siyartoli* (fox), etc. Places are also named after birds, e.g., *Bakulatoli* (crane), *Murgitoli* (hen), *Minjurtoli* (peacock). Villages are named after crops, vegetables, eatables, ethnic communities, languages, songs, festivals, markets, religious beliefs, etc. (Minj, 1994:35-40). Persons are named after days, months, seasons and festivals such as *Etwa* (Sunday), *Somra* (Monday), *Phagu* (March/festival), *Karam* (festival), *Chait* (April), *Bhado* (September), *Katik* (November), etc. This is indicative of how well-knit the tribals are with nature.

2.3 Tribal Institutions and Ecological Concerns

2.3.1 Adaptive Cultural Mechanism

The tribals have rich adaptive cultural mechanisms to ensure a healthy ecological balance. Their institutions like taboos, sacred rites, clan-name system, etc., provide the framework for defining acceptable resource use. These traditional practices ensure a rational use of animals for food and other purposes. In this practice there is a philosophy of resource utilisation, conservation and environmental protection. The tribal worldview has created respect for animals, forests,

rocks, mountains and rivers. Certain places are declared sacred either because of the belief that some beings, more superior to humans, resides there or because they are deemed suitable for religious worship. These sacred places can never be abused resulting thereby in protecting the biodiversity of the whole eco-system. These beliefs and norms maintain social pressures that control individual and group behaviour. The traditional practices are enforceable as customary law. The collective responsibility is manifested in their everyday life. The community interests are given priority to those of individuals. Environmental concerns are communitarian and not individual. Among the adherents of the traditional tribal religion, popularly called the *Samas*, the *Sama* grove (a cluster of Sal trees) is the common place of worship. The grove being considered sacred, does not tolerate any desecration by felling these trees.

2.3.2 Taboos and Ecology

The institution of taboos is another way of protecting environment. Taboos are prohibitions. Certain animals are protected through a complex system of taboos. Killing them is a violation of law against the tribe which could result in ostracism. The Toḍa tribe of Nilgiri hills, for instance, has special relationship with catie. The married Kharias of Jharkhand do not eat beef. Marriage is the culmination of their maturity and adulthood. Oxen are an extension of their life because they toil day and night along with their master. The feast of *Sohrai* which coincides with Deepavali (festival of lights) is primarily dedicated to *Gaurea*, the deities who take care of their cattle. Women wash the head and feet of cattle on this day. They even share food from the same plate as their cattle. Saran points out how for tribals "animals are regarded as divine in themselves as the temporary dwelling of a divine soul or of a feared or highly honoured deceased man, or as the symbol or totem of a tribe or race" (1978:138).

Animals share the living rooms of the inmates in many tribal families in the villages. Animals are never killed for sports and commercial purposes. They are killed for meat, medicine but not indiscreetly. As per their clan taboos, tribals never kill those animals which represent their clan. The annual *Phaggu sendra* (ritual hunting) and *Jani Shikar* (hunting by women) once in 12 years among the Oraon tribe are of socio-religious significance. However, animals destroying humans, animals and crops can be killed with due consultation with the village elders. Contrary to the propaganda of

some environmentalists of the tiger lobby fame opposed to the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Rights to Forest) Bill, 2005, ritual or ceremonial hunting of the tribals has never threatened animal species with extinction. Never has there been a concerted effort to eradicate animals (ibid. 38).

Plant life is also treated with equal respect. There are certain taboos prohibiting the destruction or even use of plant species. They can only be used for medicinal and religious purposes. Even if they are cut they are quickly replaced. They are cut in such a way that new shoots come out again. Tribals fully depend on the natural resources for their survival. Leaves are their plates, cups and spoons. Umbrellas are made out of leaves and bamboos. The materials they use in day-to-day life are eco-friendly unlike the synthetic materials produced by the multinational companies. Hence, destroying what nature has given them will be their own elimination, which they will do only as the last resort. Women are in the forefront of environmental preservation, protection and promotion.

2.3.3 Totemistic Beliefs and Environment

In tribal worldview the members of the totemistic group have personal and social relationships. Each item of nature has a spirit. Spirits may be benevolent or malevolent. But the presence of the spirit in stones, waters, trees is real for them. For tribals, the ancestors form part of a living society. This living consciousness of spirits in nature makes the Adivasi perspective on ecology different from those of others (Minz, 1993:68). These are social control mechanisms of the tribals which help them develop a sustainable utilization of natural resources. In the practical life of the tribal there is no need to impose totem taboos. Everybody knows about them and practices them earnestly. Nirmal Minz interprets the trees, plants, animals, insects and all things and beings as humans' relatives.

Totemism is the basis of their socio-political organisation in so far as kinship, marriage, and relations are concerned. The fauna and flora of their past and present habitats supply the bulk of the totem names (Roy, 1984:86-90). For instance, the beast totems among the Oraon are *Kiss* (pig), *Lakra* (tiger), *Tirki* (young mice); among the Munda, *Erget* (rat); among the Kharia, *Kiro* (tiger). The bird totems among the Oraons are *Gidhi* (vulture), *Khakha* (raven), *Kerketa* (hedge sparrow); among the Munda, *Kongari* (white crow). The fish and other aquatic totems among the Munda are *Aind* (eel); among the Kharia, *Dungdung*

(eel), *Kullu* (tortoise); and among the Oraon, *Kindo* (fish). The reptile totems among the Oraon are *Nag* (cobra). The Oraon vegetable totems are *Bakhla* (a species of grass), *Khes* (paddy), *Kujur* (a medicinal creeper). The Oraon mineral totems are *Panna* (iron), *Beck* (salt), etc.

There are indications in the tribal culture that the totemic animals or plants are believed to have helped or protected the human ancestor of the clan, or been of some peculiar service to him. Roy observes that the Oraons as a general rule abstain from eating or otherwise using, domesticating, killing, destroying, maiming, hurting or injuring the animal or plant or other object that forms his totem. They do not use anything made of it or obtained from it and when practicable, they prevent others from doing so in their presence. In the case of tree totems, the members of the clan neither go under the shade of the tree nor cut or burn its wood nor use its produce in any form (1984:42).

2.4 Foundational Principles of Human-Nature Relationship

2.4.1 Holistic Spirituality

Holism, the hallmark of tribal spirituality, is the guiding principle for the tribal approach to nature and the entire cosmos. The worldview of the Indian tribes can be studied in terms of their spirituality which emanates respect for nature. Tribal spiritualism, viz. belief in the supernatural, creates respect and reverence for animals, forests, rocks, mountains, rivers and all other beings under the sun. This belief system explains why certain places are revered, certain activities prohibited, certain rivers, mountains and rocks worshipped. Some anthropologists, including Roy would call them animists in a narrow sense who see spirits dwelling in beings living and non-living (1984:278). Others like Lakra would claim that they are not animists but monotheists (1997:20). But the tribal spiritual worldview is much more than the controversy of whether they are animists or not. Their belief is that the spirit is in everything and it is the spirit that links nature with people and they understand how everything is inter-linked and interdependent (see Kujur, 1998).

2.4.2 Notion of Humans as Stewards

The tribal notion of personhood is rooted in their concept of land. Earth is mother to them. Personhood is absent if there is no land. Alienation from the land is an alienation from nature, community and self. Landlessness, therefore, is as good as lifelessness.

Land is a gift from God; humans have not earned it. The plot of land allocated for the *Pahan* (Priest) for his upkeep can never be sold or transferred. God has created the land as we find in the *Jraon* Genesis myth where Dharmes creates the land with the help of the creatures. The Kharias believe that Ponmesor created land with the help of a crab (Kullu, 1998:36-7). The Hos, the Santhals and other tribes of Chotanagpur have similar beliefs about the creation of the land.

The tribes of the North-East such as Singpho, Apa Tani, Khasis, Nagas, Hill Miri, Khampti, Mishmi, Lepcha, etc., in their genesis myths emphasise on the three moments of creation, namely isolation, sacrifice and integration. The unity of all experience and the harmony of all existence emerge from the myths (Saraswati, 1991:63-79). What is strikingly similar in most of the tribal myths is that the creatures collaborate with the Creator to bring in harmony in the cosmos. Not only that, if things go wrong an effort is made to bring back the original harmony even at the cost of sacrificing themselves. Hence, the Adivasis use the land as stewards and not as owners. It implies that human beings cannot cut a tree without reciprocity of supplementing its loss. Animals cannot be hunted and killed indiscriminately. Animals can be killed only at the due season in the year. Such reciprocities keep the balance between man and nature. Reciprocity avoids opposition and confrontation, and the notion of conquering one by the other (Minz, 1993:68-9).

2.4.3 A Sense of Interdependence

There is a tremendous sense of interdependence. Since centuries, the tribals have developed cultural mechanism to ensure the continuity of natural resources. The sense of conservation has grown out of the cumulative knowledge of the millions of timeless people and not from the observation of a few individuals. Their understanding of life is holistic; viz. life is only possible if these resources continue to be available for human use. Conservation values and practices come from social responsibility. The earth and humans are placed on the same level - an idea which is alien to modern Western culture. The idea of inter-dependence and not of domination is what makes tribals' relationship with nature symbiotic.

3. Intervention of Science for Sustainable Ecology

The women in tribal societies have, through various adaptive measures, tried to sustain environment.

Despite their best efforts the modern processes of change and faulty models of development have played havoc in the life of tribals. In such a circumstance, it is impractical to keep the scientific developments at bay. Hence, the modern-science needs to be more humane so as to be at the service of the humanity at large rather than of a few consumerists who exploit nature indiscreetly. The term 'ecology' means 'household' or 'home' or 'place to live'. Thus ecology is a field of study concerned with relationship between the living organisms and their environment. It can also be said, "Ecology is the scientific study of animals and plants in relation to their environment" (Kotpal & Bali, 1988:1).

Ecological studies cover a vast area. They deal with habitat and its nature which includes Freshwater Ecology, Desert Ecology, Forest Ecology, Cropland Ecology, Marine Ecology, etc. It focuses on the population which includes the study of inter-relationship of different groups of organisms; the analysis of ecosystem from structural and functional point of view, including the inter-relationship of biotic and abiotic components. It also covers proper management of natural resources like land, water, forests, sea, mines, etc., for the benefit of human beings; the gross and net production of different ecosystem like freshwater, agriculture, etc., so that proper management is possible to get maximum yield; energy conservation and its flow in the organisms within the ecosystem is managed. It encompasses the organisms of the past geological environment; deals with genetic make up of species or populations in relation to environment and helps in the development of partially or completely regenerating ecosystem for supporting life of man during extended exploration of extra-terrestrial environment.

The ecology of various taxonomic groups as insect ecology, microbial ecology, invertebrate ecology, vertebrate ecology, etc. helps in understanding the functional adjustments of organism for the survival of population; adaptations of animals or preference of particular organisms like insects to particular chemical substances; the dispersal of fauna as a result of multiple interactions between the individual and the environment. This knowledge ultimately builds to the environment with human as the central theme; natural resources, their rational conservation and preservation; the inter-relationship of community to its environment; the undesirable change in the physical, chemical or

biological characteristics of the air, land and water, affecting human, animal and plant lives (ibid. 3-5).

The list is long, but the point here is that ecology is concerned with anything and everything under the sun. The tribal societies are concerned about the conservation of natural resources. It is here that the scientific knowledge can contribute to the standardization of the indigenous knowledge and technology for a viable alternative.

4. Conclusion

What emerges from the present study is the uniqueness of tribal response to the ecological crisis due to the human greed. Though we have singled out women-environment interrelations for our treatment in this paper, what we have actually done is to look at some of the cultural mechanisms. The only reason for not compartmentalising women is that man-woman relationship in the tribal worldview is that of complementarity and not of segmentation. Hence, the tribal society's symbiosis with nature also speaks of the tribal woman's communion with the entire cosmos. The tribals have shown the way to the modernised and sophisticated generation how to promote ecological balance in everyday life. The so-called superior Western culture can talk about preventing the world from ecological disaster; the tribal culture just does it unassumingly. Development is necessary but not at the cost of human life. In all the development activities, the missing dimension is the spirituality that ultimately sustains the tribes in their management and utilisation of natural resources.

The paper argues that complementarities are essential for a healthy relationship between traditional beliefs and modern science. Despite socio-cultural mechanisms in the tribal society for the preservation, protection and sustenance of ecology, scientific and technological progress must make interventions to complement the tribal belief patterns. The beliefs of the tribals alone cannot sustain it for very long if they are not assisted by science. Here it is not denying the fact that many of these cultural mechanisms have their foundations in natural sciences. The traditional societies may not have been able to articulate them in scientific terms. But they have indeed been engaged in scientific activities using religious language. What the modern science is doing now is redefining it in modern terms, using a new language of science and processing it to make it sophisticated. Development in science will not be

effective unless it is acceptable to the local people. This acceptability can come about only when science is sensitive to the cultural ethos. And success will not come about either until cultural and religious practices pave the way for what is good for society at large. A healthy and meaningful dialogue is all that is required for a healthy relationship between tribal society and environment, between tribal women and environment.

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