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Tribal Women our Environmental Guard: An Ecofeminist Perspective

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Abstract—The tribes are the real saviour of the environment they have from years have been working towards saving and guarding the environment for the future generation not only saving they regard the environment as deity. Praying and regarding every part of nature as living that forms the Earth. The role of women in safeguarding the environment is present everywhere and so is the tribal community. Women have the power to bring life to earth sharing the same qualities as nature, like nurturing. All these qualities of nature and women bring them close by sharing the isomorphic bond. The world is in the middle of mass extinction and is facing environmental degradation day by day. As a responsible citizens its become the duty of an individual to extend his focus towards the environmental issues across the world. Along with how such problems can be minimized or controlled by proper understanding of the environment as a whole. Many researcher, academicians, environmentalist from time and again tried to attract attention of society towards the problem. As the mainstream society are somewhat ignorant towards the damage. Natives of the world. As far as Indian context is concerned, Indian tribes have always been in the forefront for safeguarding the environment. They have always stood for protecting it, particularly women as they are the ultimate food gatherers and food provider to the family, and the community as a whole. Sharing a Cosmoforic bond with nature. This special bond of her with nature provides her the nurturing and motherly qualities. She plays a vital role in taking care of the families, and in a large scenario protecting the ecosystem from very past to present and will continue in future. Any change in the ecological balance of the earth has an adverse effect on human species especially to women. The growing degradation of the environment has affected the Tribes of the country very drastically. The paper will hence try to focus on the role of tribes especially women in safeguarding mother nature. Along with the view how they are achieving their goal of safeguarding it and becoming successful in doing so.

Keywords—Degradation, Ecofeminism, Nature, Tribes, Women

As Tuan Observes

Parents give birth to and succor their offspring, who in turn honor their parents and care for them in old age. Nature nurtures men and men own reverence.

Pity is compassionate urge to protect the fragile beauty and goodness of life against its enemies...patriotism is geo- Piety remove its exogenous imperial cloak and patriotism is compassion for the vulnerability of once native soil.(qtd in Singh 153)

I. INTRODUCTION

India holds the second largest tribal population after that of African continent. Spread in almost every part of the country from Jammu Kashmir to Kanyakumari including tribes like Abor, Bhil, Beda, Gond, Garos, Munda, Siddi, Halba, Korva, Kanikkaran, Kani, Wancho and many. From the very earliest times tribes of India covered geographical areas including plateaus, hills and forests. leaving isolated and untouched lives away from the well civilized society. Possessing their own identity and culture, without the interference of others. Feeling secured in the lap of nature and ignoring the development and technological advancement to which the civilized human beings are chasing. They regard nature as their home, and are totally against the concept of destroying or even harming their home. After invasion of the tribal areas in the name of so called industrialisation and commercialisation the the tribes stood against it by rejecting the deterioration of forests. The Indian term used to denote tribes is Adivasi a inclusion of Adi+vasi a primitive Dwellers or indigenous peoples. To define “a group of people consisting of families related to each other and with the same custom language and religion”.(Oxford dictionary) Preserving our culture, heritage and nature.

The deterioration and damage that the so called civilized human beings are causing to nature is questionable. Damaging their own sustainability while inviting and moving towards climatic disasters like hurricanes, floods, cyclones, landslides, earthquakes and many more. The thrust of development and technology has made the humans non-human that are in phase of destroying its very own creator, preserver, healer- the Mother Earth.



II. UNTANGLING THE TANGLED TRIBE

As we look up to the literal meaning of tribe it can be defined as the group of people that have same language and customs and have chief as their leader. For the Western people, a tribe is a particular social circle or a group of people who are far away from the civilization, doesn't have access to the technology, and have their own customs and traditions to follow. Who are least interested to become civilized in any sense.

According to Lucy Mair "tribe is an independent political division of a population with a common culture".

As per W.J. Perry "Tribes is a group of people speaking a common dialogue and inhabiting a common territory"

According to Sachchidanand a "tribal society as a system of small producers with simple technology and equipment often relying primarily for their subsistence on what they themselves produce"(Tribal Society).

Through these definitions it is clear that a tribe is a group of people that has common customs and traditions to follow. They live in their own community having a sense of unity and residing in a certain geographical territory. India is the land of tribes. As a civilized community our ancestral background was also somewhere or the other were the nomadics.

As far as the figures to be followed the tribes that are scheduled in the constitution has spread in 30 States including Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Himachal, Jammu Kashmir, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, and to the each and every state of India. all over India and there are about 705 individual ethnic groups notified as STs, approximately 10.43 crores of population of scheduled tribes in India(Census of India 2011) it is through the study of tribes that we can be able to understand our environment, its degradation. With an objective to protect and safeguard our environment from destruction. The extinction of various beautiful species could be stopped. And the world becomes a beautiful place to live in for all the organisms that are part of it.

III. TRIBES THE REAL ENVIRONMENTALIST-

The culture and festivals of tribes are related and surrounded to nature, and is celebrated for nature. Most of the tribes worship the five elements of nature -fire, air, water, land believing in animism and considering them sacred. The religious belief or practice of these native people plays a great role in saving lakhs and lakhs of groves and trees across India. Even scientists believe that the religious practices of the natives are helpful in boosting conservation and are beneficial to increase the green cover in India.

Worshipping trees is the age-old practice in India including Banyan, Neem, Tulsi, Banana, Peepal. The preservation of these trees has a strong ancient belief that any damage caused to these groups can anger their deities living on it. And in return these deities will take revenge while sending curse to the people. As Satish Battarahali Narayanappa remarked "The community believe that if they protect the group the deity will protect them".(Yarlagadda par.24). The tribes like Gharo and Khasi and many have been preserving their sacred groups from the interference of humans for decades.

IV. SPIRITUALITY IN NATURE-

The tribes mainly worship nature including mountains, animals, trees, rocks, rivers , land etc and have spiritual significance to nature including the rituals they have dedicated to the natural entities. The festivals of the tribes are mainly to make the deities happy the madai festival celebrated in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh by the Gond tribe is embarked with rituals, dance, music. It is dedicated to the goddess Danteshwari for bringing prosperity and well being. Bhagoriya festival in Madhya Pradesh is celebrated by Bhil tribes at the end of winter. The Nagaji festival in Madhya Pradesh is celebrated to reward the dieting from the protection of snake bites and to get the blessings for agriculture fertility and wellbeing. Sakshar kut festival of Mizoram is celebrated by the Mizos that mark the end of farming season. Similarly to that of Jharkhand particularly by the Santhal community which is celebrated as the harvest festival, Sohri tribe of Jharkhand celebrate the same festival by worshipping animals and performing cultural performance with the traditional paintings on wall. The Nuakhai of Odisha has same reason to be celebrated. The Sui dhaga festival celebrated by the Bhil tribe of Rajasthan involving the swing of clothes with needle and friend symbolize the unity and harmony among them. Many other festivals that include the worship of trees, animals, Sun rivers, mountains as deities. Through all these festivals and rituals that tribes possess one thing in common that is regarding nature as their God and believing in the unity of people. These very habits of the tribes makes them the savior of nature as they regard nature as their creator and phrase it from years to years.

V. ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

As human beings are at the highest speed of destroying their own surrounding their own environment. Leading damage to climate through deforestation etc .Making drastic change in climatic conditions and adversely affecting the ecosystem as whole.



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The world is a witness of various climatic disasters happening around whether it be earthquakes in Japan, Tsunami, Hurricanes, India (Assam) landslide, Australia bushfire and the countless deforestations across for constructing roads, industries etc. Billions of people depending on the forest for their livelihoods are in worse conditions. Conservation of the environment is surely a global agenda and hence the importance of the terms like eco-feminism and environmentalism are to be viewed in the context. The damage that man is continually causing to earth is beyond repair. Many species are becoming extinct including animals and trees. Due to this damage we are slowly losing the chirping of birds, pollution free air and the wonderful nature around us. As per Archana Godbole a botanist and director of Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF) Pune, conserving the groves says “unless we create some mechanism where people see the benefit of conserving sacred forest the forest will not remain for our next generation it's important for us to do something on ground”.

It is human responsibility to guard our nature for our future generation. Or else it can be said that we can't even have a future generation, if such degradation goes on and on. For achieving the long term climatic goal of India it is important to conserve the forest and take necessary steps to minimize the degradation of any sort. With the construction of a national highway (recently being constructed) between Raipur (Chattisgarh) to Visakhapatnam (A.P) millions hectares of forest have been cut down to build the road. Do we really require such 6 lanes keeping the environment and the trees at stake. If the continuity of this degradation doesn't stop in no time we will definitely lose the beautiful nature and civilization and there will be no human species left to enjoy such developments. In order to safeguard and preserve our environment many tribal women are coming to the forefront and fighting for the perseverance that calls for the ecofeminism studies of the context.

VI. ECOFEMINISM

Eco feminism is that branch of feminism that is related to ecology and feminism both it is basically establishing The parallel between the both ideologies. establishing the undeniable relationship between women and nature. the term was first coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1970.

Eco feminist believe that women and nature should be equally treated as men and the patriarchal approach should be demolished.

Women are protecting nature even when the term was not coined when the term was unknown and was not in existence. Many environmental movements are led by women who can forget the famous Chipko movement in India where each woman cuddled the tree and stopped the mass cutting down of the forest. The involvement of women for conservation is to be considered very crucial. Being an ecofeminist does not only imply that women are the only or wholesale savior of nature but there are men who equally participate in saving nature. Ecofeminism is basically not about thinking ourselves as superior but to establish a relation with nature. Ecofeminism sidelines the hierarchical concept.

According to Karen Warren

The first striking point about ecofeminist power theory is that ecofeminism claims that patriarchal structures justify their dominance through categorical or dualistic hierarchies: mind/body, male/ female, heaven/ earth, human/ animals spirit/matter culture/nature white/ non white. Established oppressive system continue to manifest their abusive power by reinforcing assumptions of these binaries even making them sacred through religious and scientific construct (qtd in. Singh 10).

Vandana Shiva focuses on how the society observes women and nature activity which have been mistakenly deemed as passive.

The marginalization of women and the destruction of biodiversity go hand in hand ,she is describing the commonality of gendered and environmental oppression, as well the specific location of women as vulnerable to monoculture capitalism, but also particularly placed to conserve biodiversity (Shiva 2014, 164).

The conceptualization of females in Indian religious history holds the strongest past. The earth itself presents the image of goddess Dharti Mata and all the geographical features in India are personified as goddesses: the mountains, trees, plants , streams ,rivers ,rocks , lakes and are considered to have a feminine power inherent in nature. The eco feminist concept is based on the social experience of the female that is the work of twenty four hours reaffirming the life and the practice of caring of communities, home, child bearing, food providing, protecting the culture while rooted to nature.

As Ursula Le Guin say “where I live at a woman is too a man wilderness but to me it is a home”(qtd in Singh 111)

Greta Gaard further adds in her work Ecofeminism and Wilderness that

The topic of wilderness is meaningful for eco feminist enquiry because eco feminism is a movement to name restore value and preserve what western industrialized culture has attempted to destroy a moment to heal the artificial separation of western culture and nature to that and the concept and the importance of wilderness must find the place in ecofeminism. (7)

As women are closed to nature she is forced to be alienated from it by the patriarchal society.

As Birch and Zimmerman states

Women and nature as part of the other to be dualised self of man and western culture what has been absent from eco feminist of normative dualism is the other of wilderness wilderness is the other of western culture it is also the place where wilderness and the erotic are present projected outside of western culture. (qtd in Singh 113)

As women are progressing and becoming civilized and getting at par of man to it the civilized man says

I am self, I am Master, all the rest is other outside, below, underneath, subservient, I owe, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matters is for. I am that I am, and the rest is women and wildlife to be used as I see fit (qtd in Singh 115)

The reply of which is given by Susan Griffin in 1978 as

We say there is no way to see his dying as separate from her leaving, or what he had done to her, or what part of her he had used. We say if you change the course of this river you change the shape of the whole place. And we say that what she did then could not be separated from what she held sacred in herself, what she had felt when he had said that to her, ... (Qtd in Singh 116)

So in this way, eco feminist believe that nature and women are being objectified subordinate and other by the patriarchal societal construct. The work of eco feminist is mainly towards understanding the social context of nature and women.

VII. TRIBAL WOMEN AS ENVIRONMENTAL AGENTS

The woman of Tribes has the lion share of responsibility. They are mainly forest dwellers and dependent on plant and plant products for their survival. Though both man and woman work for the family.

Women have additional responsibilities of the household chores. From collecting forest products, firewood collections, preparation for religious ceremonies, constructing household implements, having knowledge of traditional medicine, cloth designs etc to pass on to the next generation. Each thing has women at center.

Religious gatherings and festivals are an existential part of tribal people. Women are in Central rule to organize such events preserving their culture and unity.

It was in the beginning of 1960 when the green revolution began that had a great impact on India's agriculture. Focusing on high yielding crops from biodiversity. Having a great impact on indigenous seeds. The impact of it was hardly recognised initially but in the present scenario as a climate change and degradation of environment the loss of indigenous seeds are felt. The situation is urgent and has to be addressed soon, meanwhile a women's group of Sangela village Banswara district is preserving the traditional varieties.

One among them is Kanti Devi she says

We women have taken up the task of preserving seeds, what men do, they know nothing regarding seed conservation.

[Memorizing her mother who taught her the seed conservation method] Basically women have a fair idea of where and in what quantity seed has to be preserved

[Kunkun Devi of the same district said] Earlier used to grow paddy and Maize but now we grow green leafy vegetables like pumpkin chili okra pumpkin and turmeric among others besides we grow fruits like papaya mango so that domestic needs are fulfilled. (Vaagdhara par.4-5)

According to Aleta born and Indonesian environmental activities known in her community as Mama Aleta

“The forest is the life of my people the trees are like force in our skin the water is like the blood that flows through us... the forest is the mother of my tribe”

Mayilamma, a 60 year old tribal widow, from Palakkad district Kerala played an important role against Coca-Cola company that is accountable for the shortage and the pollution caused in water because of the company. The Company shutdown as a result of a campaign against Coca-Cola.

Suryamani Bhagat founder of Torang tribal rides and culture center in the eastern India state of Jharkhand is working to protect the state's precious forest locally known as Jharkhand Jungle Bachao Andolan initially the movement started with 15 adivasi womens. The woman ensures that no trees are cut off unless very necessary. (Menon 3)



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In Chhattisgarh Adivasi women need 300 km of March to save Hasdeo forest. 65 year old Adivasi movement in Surguja district Mayawati uttered “we will not leave our forest and land for Adani”. Adivasi came together from North Korba and Sarguja and Surajpur district of Chhattisgarh to protest against the coal mining project that forced the land acquisition in 2021. As a result, the government has withdrawn its political commitment.

Bipasha Paul a program officer of Chhattisgarh based NGO Janabhivyakti who is working for the residence of Hasdeo Anand commented

Whatever the village face any pressure with regard to mining, women are the first one to stand up against it. This is because women pay a disproportionality high cost for displacement caused by mining”

[She added] take water for instance mining destroys and pollutes all available water resources in the area. As a result women have to walk for several kilometers to fetch drinking water

[Further] women have played a useful role in mobilizing people for the movement ever since the combined gram sabha meeting and the protest march was announced women of The villages started spreading awareness about the gravity of the situation and motivating people to join in large numbers. (Hussain par.9-11)

VIII. CONCLUSION

These are only some examples of women as Frontier for saving the environment.

After coming across such examples and experience. We can definitely say that tribal people are the best conservers of the surroundings. Maintaining their lands from generations to generations. Any force of removing them from their land will definitely result in environmental damage to the whole Earth. Such displacement of tribals are violation of human rights and are against human ethical grounds. Letting the tribes where they are is the best and cheapest way to save our earth.

Women of these groups have shown tremendous powers in saving their environment and rejecting the development of any sort. The tribal women are the Shakti to save nature.

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