



Role of Tribal Women in Sustainable Development

KEYWORDS

Tribal women, Environmental conservation

Dr.Seema Menon K.P

Assistant Professor, NSS Training College, Ottapalam, Pin- 679101

ABSTRACT *Women provide sustenance to the family and community by their judicious use and management of natural resources. Women are consumers, producers, educators and caretakers of their families, playing an important role for a sustainable eco-system in the present and future. However, environmental deterioration has a negative effect on the health and quality of life especially of girls and women. A policy of conservation of natural resources will be successful only if women are integrated into all programmes and policy making. This paper focuses on the role of tribal women in the conservation of environment*

Introduction

The tribal population is an integral part of India's social fabric and has the second largest concentration after that of the African continent. It is more than the total population of France and Britain and four times that of Australia. The population of tribal communities scheduled in the Constitution of India and known as Scheduled Tribes (STs) was 8.43 crore (1 crore = 10 million) as per 2001 census and accounts for 8.2% of the total population. 4.26 crores are men and 4.17 crores are women, accounting for 8.01% and 8.40% respectively. They are scattered over all the states/UTs, except Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and the UTs of Pondicherry and Chandigarh. Tribals have traditionally lived in about 15% of the country's geographical areas, mainly forests, hills and undulating inaccessible terrain in plateau areas, rich in natural resources. They have lived as isolated entities for centuries, largely untouched by the society around them.

Role of Tribal women

In tribal communities, the role of women is substantial and crucial. They constitute about half the total population but in tribal society women are more important than in other social groups, because they work harder and the family economy and management depends on them. Even after industrialization and the resultant commercialization swamped the tribal economy, women continued to play a significant role. Collection of minor forest produce is done mostly by women and children.

Tribal Women's Environmental conservation and sustainable development are firmly on the global agenda. Ecofeminism is to be viewed in this context. The movement began in the U.S., and Sherry Ortner was among the first to point out that women's interests coincide with nature's while man's with culture. Ecofeminism considers that: (a) there is a distinct relationship between women and the environment, (b) women have certain responsibilities which make them dependent on nature and (c) women have an extensive knowledge of natural resources. Eco-feminism points to the need for an integrated view of nature, culture and gender issues. An appropriate strategy of development would be one which is not only ecologically sustainable but takes the interests of women into consideration.

Women provide sustenance to the family and community by their judicious use and management of natural resources. Women are consumers, producers, educators and

caretakers of their families, playing an important role for a sustainable eco-system in the present and future. However, environmental deterioration has a negative effect on the health and quality of life especially of girls and women. A policy of conservation of natural resources will be successful only if women are integrated into all programmes and policy making.

Tribal habitations are facing environmental hazards everywhere due to careless, unplanned and faulty development policies followed by government's skipping the necessary environmental safeguards in development projects. Most development activities impinge upon the environment and adversely affect the ecological balance. The large scale cutting of forest trees in tribal habitats has led to a shortage of fuel, fodder, foliage and forest produce which form the economy of tribals. In the changed context of development, environment protection and sustainable development with a human centred approach must be ensured. Since tribal women are engaged in ecological movements, environmental protection and conservation, their role may be enhanced through capacity building and empowerment in the context of ecological development. Tribal Women and Forests Tribals have been residing in forest areas for generations, cultivating land and collecting non-timber forest produce. As per the Forest Survey of India Report, 2003, 60.04% of the 63% forest cover of the country and 63% of dense forests lie in 187 tribal districts, though the geographical area of these districts is just 33.6% of the country's geographical area. Out of 58 districts, which have more than 67% of their area under forest cover, 51 are tribal districts. A comparison of the 2001 and 2003 assessments of forest cover in tribal districts shows a net increase of 321,100 hectares underscoring a very strong symbiotic relationship between tribals and forests and of tribals being at the forefront of conservation regimes.

While tribal women have more say in family decisions than their non-tribal counterparts, they also share more responsibilities. Preparing food and providing for drinking water is solely their responsibility so they operate closely with the forests from where they get water, fuel and minor products including edible fruits, tubers, flowers, vegetables and berries. Minor forest produce plays an important part in the tribal economy. Its collection and marketing is a major source of livelihood for most tribal families contributing around 70% of their total income. The different varieties are classified as plants for use in tanning, natural gums,

resins and balsams, plants and seeds used in pharmacy and perfumery and tendu leaves. Firewood is also provided by forests. Since firewood gathering is done mainly by women, the interaction between forests and women gets further enhanced. Since all the duties of tribal women are connected with the forests and they look towards the forest for nature's gifts, their dependence on forests is strong and intrinsic.

Role of Tribals in conservation of biodiversity

1. Plants are conserved in natural habitat and is being worshipped by tribals as home of god and goddess.

Many plants are conserved in their natural habitat by tribals due to magico - religious belief that they are habitat of god and goddess. The tribal culture prevalent in tribal pockets in Central India has been recorded in Dindori, Balaghat and Mandala districts of Madhya Pradesh and Kawardha and Bilaspur districts of Chhatisgarh states. The survey study reveals that plants and flowers have a profound influence on them. Tribals worship trees and flowers as they believe that God and Goddesses reside in them

2. Crop plants are conserved by tribals as source of food

The ethnic and indigenous people have conserved several plants and endangered cultivars of agricultural crops such as rice, maize, millets, grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables which have originated under diverse agro-ecological climates in north-east, central and peninsular region of India, the indigenous communities have their abode, e.g. some of these indigenous cultivars of rice such as Pattambi, Champara, Valsana are conserved by Kurichya, Pariyar, Khasi, Jatin and Garo tribes in North East region - Manipur, Meghalaya, Assam and 150 wild cultivars of rice which are conserved by Santhal, Munda, Birhor and Gond tribes of Madhya Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Orissa, Jharkhand and Bihar. These cultivars are genetically superior than existing cultivated rice varieties in characters like aroma, grain quality, protein content, digestibility and also found resistance to insects, pests and diseases. These varieties are now multiplied by rice breeders and incorporated in All India Co-ordinated Rice improvement programme at Central Rice Research Institute Cuttack and at International Rice Research Institute Philippines, Manila (Arora⁵).

3. Diversity of plants are conserved by tribals as wild fruits, seeds, bulb, roots and tubers for edible purpose

The ethnic and indigenous people have to depend upon several wild species for fruits, seeds, bulbs, roots and tubers which are used for edible purposes

Tribals follow environmental conservation rule in harvesting edible plants which establishes ecological prudence. Tubers of edible plants like those of *Dioscorea* spp. are harvested by tribals when the leaves of the vine turns yellow and has physiologically matured. The wild tubers are dig carefully avoiding damage to associated species.

4 Plants are conserved in natural habitat in forest used as antidote of snake bite and scorpion- sting by tribal herbal healers

Many plant species are of great economic importance to tribals as rhizomes of such plants like *Acorus calamus*, stem bark of *Bunchania lanzan*, stem and leaves of *Moringa oleifera*, *Achyrrthus aspera*, *Gynandropsis gynandra*, *Bombax ceiba* are being used as antidote of snake - bite and scorpion sting. Paste is prepared from rhizome and

applied on wounds. These plants are conserved for above purpose by tribals

5. Plants are conserved in natural habitat and used for setting bone fracture and in orthopedic treatment of tribal herbal healers

The root, stem and leaves of some plants are powdered and paste is prepared and applied by tribals on broken bone portions. The paste prepared from stem and leaves of plants like *Vanda tessala*, *Alternanthera sessilis* and of roots of *Cassia adnata*, *Sida cordata*, *Bauhinia purpurea* etc. are tied for healing of wound for 10 - 15 days on broken bones. These plants are conserved by tribal herbal healers in natural forests for orthopedic treatments.

6. Plants are conserved by tribals in natural habitat and utilised as medicinal herbs

Primitive and indigenous people have been using several plants for combating disease from centuries and are found wide acceptance in traditional medicinal use. Plants like *Equisetum ramosissimum*, *Argemone maxicana* are dried, powdered and paste is applied on infested portion of skin and on wounds. Plants like *Bauhinia purpurea*, *Sida acuta*, *Jatropha curcus*, *Grewia hirsutum*, *Albizia lebeck*, *Capparis deciduas* are conserved as used in muscular pain, cure of fever, headache, and body swelling.

Decoction prepared from roots of *Curculigo orchiodes*, *Bombax ceiba*, to cure white discharge in urine of tribal women are also conserved by primitive tribes.

7. Plants are conserved in abandoned sites of shifting agriculture by tribals

The shifting agriculture jhoom practice of cultivation of crops are practiced by ethnic societies in North-East region of India in states of Assam, Tripura, Mizoram etc. in Central India in states of U.P., Maharashtra, Orissa and Chhatisgarh and in South India in states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala. In this practice a forest is cleared by felling of trees and plant bio-mass is burnt and the ashes collected which are source of essential plant nutrients are spread in the fields. After an year of cultivation, the land is abandoned for several years for regeneration of fertility of soil. During this period the farmers are moved for cultivation in other land. The tribals do not perform complete felling of forest but they retain several useful species of horticultural and agricultural importance such as *Mangifera indica* (Mango), *Citrus* spp. (Orange), *Musa* spp. (Banana), *Phyllanthus embilica* (Goose berry), *Zea mays* (Maize), *Saccharum* spp. (Sugarcane). Several useful plants like *Ardisia polycephala*, *Ardisia cripisa*, *Casearia glomerata*, *Meliosma ipñata*, *Rhus* spp., *Phoenix* spp. etc. are colonized at abandoned sites.

8. Plants are conserved in sacred groves of tribals as in - situ conservation of biodiversity.

The ethnic people of India have played a vital role in preserving bio-diversity of several virgin forests and have conserved several flora and fauna in sacred groves of tribals, otherwise these flora and fauna might have been disappeared from natural eco -system. The sacred groves are the natural forests which are located in North - East, Central and Peninsular India. The interference of all kind of human activities are prohibited in sacred groves. In sacred grove of Maharashtra in Western ghat, the giant tree *Mangifera indica* (Mango) which is covered by the twiner of *Tinospora sinensis* having hanging stem and looks like trunk of elephant. Due to magico - religious belief the tribals worship mango tree and have conserved these trees in

natural eco -system. In western ghat one can find the *Curcuma domestica* the wild herbaceous species growing as carpet along with piper in some rare sights(Vartak,⁴)

Nutritional evaluation of about 200 wild species of edible purpose has also been carried out in different nutritional laboratories of CSIR, New Delhi. These plants have been collected from tribal areas (Arora ⁵). Due to high nutritional value of the most of the plant, it was observed that the tribals who still live in undisturbed forest areas and practice traditional food habits (consumption of wild cultivars and food varieties in forest from different season) are found to be more healthy and free from diseases

Environmental movements initiated by tribal women

"The forest is the life of my people, the trees are like the pores in our skin, the water is like the blood that flows through us...the forest is the mother of my tribe,". (Aleta Baun, an Indonesian environmental activist known in her community as Mama Aleta)

The winner of the 2013 Goldman Environmental Prize, she represents an expanding international movement against environmental destruction helmed by humble, often poor, rural and tribal women.

For many years, Aleta has been at the forefront of her tribe's efforts to stop mining companies destroying the forests of the Mutis Mountains that hug the western part of the island of Timor.

In the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand, Suryamani Bhagat, founder of the Torang tribal rights and cultural center, is working with women in her village of Kotari to protect the state's precious forests.

Working under the umbrella of the Jharkhand Save the Forest Movement (known locally as Jharkhand Jangal Bachao Andolan), Bhagat initially brought together 15 adivasi women to protest attempts by a state-appointed forest official to plant commercially viable timber that had no biodiversity or consumption value for the villagers who live off the land.

Now the women patrol the forest, ensuring that no one cuts more wood than is deemed necessary.

"It is my island, my people, we will not give up on them, It is our way of life that is going under the sea."(Rakova)

Over 7,000 km away, in the Pacific island state of Papua New Guinea, Ursula Rakova is adding strength to the women-led movement by working to protect her native Carteret Atoll from the devastating impacts of climate change.

Mayilamma, a 50-year-old tribal widow, has been at the forefront of the people's agitation against the multinational Coca-Cola, in the small village of Plachimada in Perumatty panchayat, in Kerala's Palakkad district. Mayilamma was directly affected by Coca-Cola's operations in Plachimada, The water in her well (in Vijaynagar colony in Plachimada) had been so heavily polluted by Coca-Cola's operations that it has been deemed unfit for human consumption.

Mayilamma played a key role in the campaign to hold Coca-Cola accountable for water shortages and pollution in the area, and it was under her leadership that the community forced the Coca-Cola bottling plant to shut down in

March 2004. The plant has remained shut down since. Mayilamma, a member of the Eravalur tribe, was the founder of the Coca-Cola Virudha Samara Samiti (Anti Coca-Cola Struggle Committee) in Plachimada which has spearheaded the campaign against Coca-Cola. The Anti-Coca-Cola Struggle Committee has held a continuous vigil directly outside Coca-Cola's factory gates since April 22, 2002, demanding its permanent closure.

All these women are ordinary mothers, tribal women, who have taken extraordinary steps to make sure that their children have a better world to live in, and that outsiders, who have no sense of their culture or traditions, do not dictate their lives.

Of course this is nothing new. Women have always played an integral role in environmental protection. What is new is their increasing prominence on the global stage as fearless advocates, defenders and caretakers.

Conclusion

Tribal peoples are generally the best conservationists; they have managed their lands sustainably for many generations. Forcibly removing tribal peoples from their land usually results in environmental damage. Such removals are a violation of human rights and should be opposed by conservationists.

The cheapest and quickest way to conserve areas of high biodiversity is to respect tribal peoples' rights – studies show reduced deforestation and forest fire rates, and greater biodiversity, on tribal land. The world can no longer afford a conservation model that destroys tribal peoples: it damages human diversity as well as the environment.

References

1. Shanti, V. and Raja Lakshmi (2002), "women and Environment", in Empowerment of Women and Ecological Development (ed.), Reddy, A.R. Serials Publications, New Delhi.
2. Sharma, S.P. and Mittal, A.C. (1998), *The Tribal Women in India*, Vol. 2, Radha Publications, New Delhi.
3. Singh, S.K. and Singh, A.K. (2006), "Sustainable Development and Tribal women", in *Land and Forest Rights of the Tribals Today* (ed.)
4. Sarkar, R.M., Serials Publications, New Delhi, pp. 168-181.
5. Sinha, Archana (2006), "Economic Empowerment and Amelioration of Tribals in India", *Kurukshetra*, Vol. 54, No. 9, July, pp. 3- 13.
6. The Annual Report (2007-08), Ministry of Rural Development, Govt. of India.
7. The National Tribal Policy – Draft, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt. of India
8. Push pagandhan P. (1994) *Ethnobiology in India. A status report*, Ministry of Environment and Forest, GOI, New Delhi.
9. Arora R.K. (1991) *Conservation and Management concept and Approach in Plant Genetic resources*.(eds.) Paroda R.S.& R.K.Arora, IBPGR, Regional office South and Southeast Asia, New Delhi, p25.
10. ZevenA.C.and Zhukovsky, P.M. (1973)*Dictionary of cultivated plants and their centers of diversity. PUDDOC*, Wageningen, p-29.
11. Anon. (1998) *Status report on biodiversity*. Ministry of Environment and Forest. GOI, New Delhi
12. Arora R.K. (1997) *Ethnobotany and its role in Conservation and Use of Plant genetic resources in India. Journal of ethnobotany*
13. Vartak KVD (1996) *Sacred groved of tribals for in-situ conservation of biodiversity*. In S.K.Jain (eds.) *Ethnobiology in Human Welfare*, p -300-302.
14. Jain S.K. (1996) *Ethnobiology in Human Welfare, Deep Publications* New Delhi.P-519 -520. on. (1991) *Atlas of Environment*. WWP. Oxford Publication. Oxford, London
15. Mayilamma - The best known face of the local people's struggle for water preservation in Kerala's northern district of Palakkad.
16. The Hindu : Kerala News : Mayilamma, symbol of anti-cola stir, is no more