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Ecofeminism in India: Struggles and Perspectives

Introduction

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In addition to the COVID-19 crisis, which may become one of the defining “before/after” moments in contemporary life, the years 2017 to 2022 might be remembered in the future as the ones being punctuated by natural or unnatural catastrophes. Hurricanes and tornadoes in the Indian and Atlantic oceans, forest fires in Australia, France, and other parts of the world, floods in India and Pakistan to name a few natural disasters, were among the images of the climate-related disorders which could, in Ghosh’s (42) words, represent “the environmental uncanny” playing itself out.

Worldwide efforts to restore forest cover and agroforestry (Vidal) notwithstanding, climate-change can no longer be taken for science fiction. Fiction itself has progressively incorporated climate change-related concerns, and particularly migration as objects of reflection and representation of the realities of people living in different settings and contexts.

Changes affecting individuals’ everyday lives have the potential of opening the floodgates of resistance. On the ground, eco-activists of the young generation across the world have been protesting against the inaction of official bodies in tackling the issue of environmental protection. The resulting anguish can sometimes find refuge in action and in words. Neologisms thus gain currency with their capacity to express thoughts. In English, the terms eco-grief and eco-anxiety have entered common parlance and others (Gachman) are being created to express specific association of ideas (blissonance: bliss and dissonance, gwilt: when you cause plants to wilt because you’re trying to conserve water, etc.) emerging from feelings about the environment and climate change.

A globalised economy heavily dependent on natural resources and global supply chains, with agriculture, urbanisation and industrial activity, mass movements of

people, dumping of waste across the planet and in the oceans, and the extinction of already endangered species are commonplace in the media images that form part of our daily lives. The underlying idea is that of the depletion of natural resources with overconsumption and the increasing inequalities in distribution and access to resources pushing the limits of sustainability. Violence towards nature is an inherent part of this process of exploitation in growth-led economies.

Feminist thought has demonstrated the links between intensive capitalist mode of functioning and patriarchal societies. Women's rights, be it concerning the inheritance or possession of land, access to education, marriage and divorce, or remunerated employment, often narrate a violent story. Thus, the acquisition of rights by women has been an ongoing struggle and in the matter of rights, nothing can be taken for granted. It is a mined terrain, linked to several other issues, as we read the history of struggles of the ideas and issues concerning the human population not only in local settings but also around the world. In the past few years, civil society movements with the involvement of youth for climate brought about a new turn in women's movements with the environmental issues capturing the headlines of journals.

As early as 1974, one of "the pioneers of the degrowth movement" (Goldblum), Françoise d'Eaubonne coined the term *écoféminisme* associating women and ecology in this neologism. It expressed dissent with the forms of knowledge or established views about growth-led economics. Moving away from questions of power, violence and exploitation, d'Eaubonne through her thought and work sought to transform the relations of human beings with nature by adopting a respectful stance towards women and nature. Both were seen as endowed with birth-giving powers.

Often explained as the combating of the strained relation between the domination of nature and the subjugation of women, especially in patriarchal setups, ecofeminism becomes a mark of asserting the self as being involved in the stance of preservation of natural resources. It also carries an inherent belief in the emancipatory potential of the term and the meanings that are loaded in the different strands of ecofeminism, even when these seem to be at odds with each other¹.

With survivalist and neo-fascist movements surging across the world and adding the ecological cause to their stew, it appears that ecology and the environmental

¹ For instance, "materialist" as opposed to "essentialist," and "Third World Environmentalism" contrary to "First World Environmentalism," as we will see in the papers of this volume.

cause is the preserve of neither ecofeminist nor Left movements (Dubiau). Different political and social movements have adopted ecology as an excuse, a reason, a canvas for action in a world where the access to natural resources, food sovereignty and affordable prices of commodities, knowledge and science, are interlinked issues. In the case of India, development and infrastructure have been leitmotifs for the possession of land and the environmental destruction that has ensued. At the same time, production and use have been causes of conflict and debate within communities (grazers, cultivators, farmers, village communities etc.) closely working with the environment (Gadgil and Guha 245).

According to the 2011 census, about 70 per cent of the Indian population lives in rural India and about 30 per cent lives in urban areas; 50 per cent of the overall labour force is dependent on agriculture². Although in rural India 73 per cent of women workers depend on agriculture, only 14 % of the landowners are women (Agarwal 2021a). Women landowners have, in some ways, made a mark for themselves³, by introducing organic farming and fishing activities, and by innovating in the forms of governance of group farms and cooperatives that run food-related businesses. Nevertheless, the question of access to loans becomes difficult (Kerketta) if a person does not own the title to the land or an identification in official records. This is the case, for example, of the Adivasis or people belonging to indigenous communities, who have not always lived sedentary forms of life.

Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* signalled public health concerns related to the disturbed and damaged ecosystems through the use of pesticides in farming and through the disposal of waste in nature by industrial complexes. In India, farmers caught in a debt trap committed suicide as a last resort and in recent years, media and independent reports have documented these tragic events. Throughout the 20th century, there has been uprising and struggle against the imposition of intensive agricultural practices or the allocation of land by the State for the implantation of factories and dams on sites from which people are displaced or their access to resources hampered.

The latest among these struggles has been the farmers' resistance across the country and more specifically in the capital New Delhi (2019-2021) to the imposition

² <https://www.competitionreview.in/blogs/2020/12/19/urban-rural-divide/>. Accessed 17th November 2022.

³ The inspiring stories of some of the women farmers were released in a publication of the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare in October 2020: https://agricoop.nic.in/sites/default/files/Success%20Story%20_%208.pdf. Accessed 23rd November 2022.

of Land Laws in India, which led to the government withdrawing the Bill in 2021. The contention of the farmers was that the deregulation of food prices would endanger access to food and grains at affordable prices. Issues related to the pollution of ground and river water were also the causes of dissent, the awareness of which made consensus within the movement possible. Women played a key role in this movement to preserve land and resources from pollution, and encroachment for “development” purposes. The perspectives that women have created for themselves through innovative agricultural practices, taking the lead in organic farming and fishing, creating group farms (Agarwal 2021 b), foraying into cooperative farming, and creating seed collectives⁴ show the potential of creating new human relations with a different vision. Subsistence (related farming and other activities) can also be a form of resistance and vital for the survival of the planet (Pruvost).

Indian cities face the challenges of urbanisation reinforced by the migration of labour unable to find accommodation, or basic amenities. The urban bourgeoisie, living a seemingly comfortable life, is not always spared by power cuts or water shortages, resources that form the basis of infrastructural development programmes. Yet even in urban environments, the celebration of popular festivals, linked to lunar movements, the cycle of agricultural activities, change of seasons and linking astral positions to rites of passage in the lives of individuals witness a profound link with nature by considering humans to be a part of the alignment of the universe.

Joining the global concern about the preservation of biodiversity, fundraising initiatives by individuals and corporate entities, charities and foundations, for instance, to “save soil”⁵ and to recreate forest cover⁶ have induced urban populations, in some ways, to sit up and take notice of, if not to get involved in, environmental issues. Even before “greenwashing” and “pinkwashing” became trendy through Corporate Social Responsibility imperatives leading to investments in the environmental and women’s causes, individuals and organisations working for social

⁴ For instance, Navdanya, a seed collective was begun by the well-known environmentalist Vandana Shiva along with the initiative and participation of local farmers: <https://www.navdanya.org/site/latest-news-at-navdanya/698-our-publications>. Accessed 5th January 2021.

⁵ <https://www.ishaoutreach.org/en/save-soil>. Accessed 2nd December 2022.

⁶ For example, the Sadhana Forest initiative to preserve natural resources near Puduchery in South India <https://sadhanaforest.org/>. Accessed 2nd December 2022.

causes to complement or fulfil the absence of state programmes had already been involved in environmental preservation⁷.

In order to address the issues related to the presence of women in the environmental cause in the Indian context, the *Société d'Activités et de Recherches sur les mondes Indiens* (SARI) devoted its annual conference held in May 2021 to the theme of "Ecofeminism: History, Struggle and Perspectives"⁸. Papers were presented in French and English by researchers working on the Indian and Latin American contexts in the field of literature and social sciences. This volume of *Représentations dans le monde anglophone* incorporates some of the texts presented during the conference⁹.

The texts presented here are English in form, vernacular in their content and global in their outreach. One could also say that multilingualism is the undercurrent in the Anglophone world in general and the Indian context in particular. Which language to use in order to effectively communicate or make one's voice heard, is a question for engaged activism.

This volume certainly does not pretend to address all the issues related to Ecofeminism in India but attempts to provide glimpses into the struggles and perspectives of the movements to preserve natural resources. The recognition of women's everyday activities which are not necessarily accounted as work but which are essential to all that constitutes economic activity in the urban or rural areas is not acquired *suo moto*. Be it collecting forest produce, weeding, planting, reaping, threshing, weaving, winnowing, farming, gardening, collection of waste, decorating, or be it in caregiving, when it comes to human relationships or with nature, as the term ecology denotes, women work closely with the environment. The migration of women into low-pay-high-value jobs such as nursing, construction, giving care has been consistently recorded by literature and the social sciences. With the failure of international summits to take urgent steps to contain climate change, the need for state intervention to regulate farming, an economic activity dependent on climate, is

⁷ For example the work of the social activist Baba Amte and his wife Sadhanatai Amte in the state of Maharashtra, which is continued by their son Prakash Amte and daughter-in-law Mandakini Amte <https://www.lokbiradariprakalp.org/>. Accessed 2nd December 2022.

⁸ This conference was organised online with the support of Université Toulouse 1 Capitole and the Laboratoire Cultures Anglo-Saxonnes EA 801, Université Toulouse 2 Jean Jaurès on the 28th and 29th May 2021. I thank the editorial board of *Representations in the Anglophone World* for having accepted this project of publication of some of the texts presented at the conference.

⁹ A second thematic volume on Ecofeminism including papers from the Indian and Latin American contexts is to be published in the journal *NaKan* in 2023-2024.

made all the more necessary (Nigam), as is that of activists involved in the movement against the Land Laws.

Emblematic among the ecofeminist movements and the one setting an example, was the Chipko movement against the felling of trees in the forests of Himachal Pradesh. This women-led movement to save forests had become an inspiration for environmental movements. Furthering the environmental cause, Vandana Shiva's endeavour to create seed collectives, in order to share and (re-)create seeds for farmers to gain independence from the power of multinational companies imposing genetically modified seeds, chemical fertilisers and pesticides, among other products, has gained worldwide recognition.

Women's movements in post-independence India have had several turns, and have taken up issues related to women's emancipation and freedom of choice. The history of women's activism in India cannot be dissociated from other social movements and the politics of development. As we can read from **Caroline Michon's** work in "**Women's movements and environmental activism in India: theoretical reflections based on the study of New Delhi,**" environmental activism in this city has been a part of the agenda of women's movement, without the term "ecology" being actually used to describe the actions undertaken. Since the 1980s, several issues have been addressed by women's and feminist organisations filling in the gaps of public policy, or raising awareness on issues of concern such as pollution, disaster management, provision of means of livelihood to the displaced, gender inequality and violence against women, recognition of the right to urban living for slum dwellers and the poor.

Based on fieldwork in the Uttara Kannada District in Karnataka, **Manisha Rao's** text "**Rethinking the Ecofeminist Discourse: View from the Western Ghats, India**" documents a local community-led movement to save the forests on which the spice garden economy depends. People who participated in the Appiko Movement in the state of Karnataka in the 1980s continued to have a strong affinity with the movement, which later on led to the creation of collectives, exchange forums and social and economic activities related to agroforestry and farm produce. In the face of rampant privatization of the Commons and environmental destruction, the ecofeminist discourse in this local context needs to be seen from a feminist political ecology perspective.

Published in 1998, Kiran Desai's novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, is set in the early 1990s, and it hints at the liberalisation of the Indian economy and throws up the question of the future of the country as the narrative unfolds in mysterious ways. In **“Eco-humanism in Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998)”**, **Lydie Le Moine** analyses how Kiran Desai's debut novel adopts magic realism to tackle environmental issues and how an imbalanced relation to the environment affects communities. While doing so, the novel calls for an ecohumanist approach.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the prolific voices in contemporary writing in English on issues of environment and climate change in his fiction and essays. In **“Critical Ecofeminism in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction: From *The Hungry Tide* to *Gun Island*,”** **Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru** presents Ghosh's writing, which documents the continuity and discontinuity between worlds, the transmission of knowledge over the centuries and the question of losing and finding vital links with humans and nature. By looking at the importance of the women characters in his fiction, Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru's text traces the author's endeavour to critique oppressive neo-colonial practices that endanger the environment and renders the lives of the underprivileged all the more vulnerable.

If ecofeminism as a movement gained prominence in the second half of the 20th century, attempts to rethink everyday household ecology and technology had already been a subject of imagination in the work of Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, an author whose texts presaged the emergence of both spiritual and political ecofeminisms. **Leslie de Bont's** text entitled **“An Ecofeminist Foremother? Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's oneiric representation of nature, technology and gender roles in ‘Sultana's Dream’”** introduces the reader to a feminist author writing in Bengali and English at the beginning of the 20th century. The locus of the powerful prose of Hossain is not just playful criticism of male attitudes; it also presents a contrast with an imaginary land with and for women, and their relation to technology, nature and gender roles.

How do Chipko and Appiko movements continue to have a resonance in discourse even if methods of resistance have changed? **“Many Faces of Madness: Mindless Destruction with Snapshots of Preservation”** brings together two perspectives on struggles in the local ecofeminist movements in two settings in northern India. The forced eviction of Adivasis or indigenous communities and the anguish of departure to a point of no return is expressed through Jacinta Kerketta's poetry of disruption.

Her poetry in Hindi throws up questions for the reader, and also the State, concerning the preservation of *jal, jangal, jameen* (water, forests, land). Language and militant engagement become vectors for social change, as documented in *Sudesh* dedicated to one of the women leaders of the Chipko movement, for whom language was one of the ways of cementing solidarity through informal exchange groups during the resistance to the felling of trees, as has been studied by **Madhumeeta Sinha**.

If language is a terrain of domination, it is also that of emancipation, as can be heard in the Hindi slogan of the women's movement in the 1980s and 1990s in India:

Hum Bharat ki Nari Hai, Phool Nahi Chingari Hai

We are Indian women; not flowers, but sparks of fire are we

NOTE:

On behalf of the SARI, I dedicate this volume to our beloved and departed colleague, Madhu Benoit, former Vice President of the association SARI, who worked at Grenoble Alpes University.

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