

Role of Women in Environmental Protection Movement in Uttarakhand, India

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ABSTRACT: *The paper examines role of women towards environmental protection in Uttarakhand. The conservation of various components of environment soil and water, forest and wildlife has been enumerated as practiced in ancient India. According to ancient Indian literature forest was for the survival and prosperity of ancient people, it was also a tradition for planting tree and digging wells by the wayside down the ages.*

Women can be the major beneficiaries of the improvement in environment and natural resources base, and it is again only their involvement which can make an improvement in it possible and meaningful. Collecting fuel, wood and fetching water takes a lot of women's time and efforts. As such women are more serious in improvement in environment. The women were responsible to collect fuel, wood, fodder and fruits for the family, therefore they play an important role in local activities and management of natural resources.

KEY WORDS: - Environment, Conservation, Ancient, Forest, Natural resources

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I. INTRODUCTION: -

Nature and the environment were given great importance from the Rigvedic period down to the medieval period. A sloka from the RIGVEDA states that

"The sky is like a father; the earth is like a mother and space is like their son"

The universe consisting of these three is like a family. Any kind of damage to anyone of three throws the universe off balance. The aim in giving such messages was to warn people to the hazards of environmental pollution. In *Chanakya-Niti* it is said that planting even a single tree with fruits and flowers makes the environment full of the fragrance just as family becomes delighted with a worthy son. Hence, we will be safe as the earth is full of nature.

The area of Uttarakhand is hilly mountainous with very steep slopes, which is thickly covered with forests of mixed nature predominantly broad leaves tree. The chief crops are Wheat (*Triticum aestivum*), Rice (*Oryza sativa*), Mandua or Koda (*Elucine coracana*), Maize (*Zee Mays*), Jhongora (*Opusmenus frumentaccus*), Marsa or chua (*Amaranthus spp*).

The system of villages and method of crop rotation bore the mark of hill-folk's natural environment with production oriented towards subsistence needs which was comfortably met and thus remained a surplus of grain for export. Their diet was supplemented by fish, fruits, vegetables and animal flesh. The people have developed a life style to suit this very delicate ecosystem.

Hills top were dedicated as sacred. Many wooded areas were not of spontaneous growth (but) bore marks of the hill-folk's instinct for plantation and preservation of the forest.

People had near total control over their forest, showed deep love of vegetation and felt a sense of responsibility towards future generations. The community was homogenous and democratic in nature, and acted as a community taking care of their natural common property resources.

The areas where our water regimes are located (Himalayas, Western and Eastern ghats together with catchment areas), National parks, Sanctuaries, Sacred groves, Biosphere Reserves and all Ecologically fragile areas non-commercial exploitation can be allowed and these need protection from fuel-starved villagers and fodder-starved cattle. For this public support must be generated in order to fulfill the real goal of eco-development. Such awareness will be very helpful for supply of goods and services to meet the local villagers needs. One very good example of public support is the Chipko Movement of women in Uttarakhand.

Women and Natural Resources in Uttarakhand: -

The tree-women relationship dominates Indian myth. The most functionally meaningful, inspires of countless myths and richest treasure of Indian sculpture motif is the Vrishkika also called by other names Yakshi, Sur-Sundari, and many others. They stand together against tree, embraced them and thus become an aspect of tree articulating the interpretation of plant and the human. The tree is dependent upon the women for its fertility as is the women on tree.

In Uttarakhand women started taking active parts in the management of their fuel and fodder reserves. In hilly areas degradation of forest cover gives way to many other problems. The deforestation on slopes accelerates many environmental degradation processes like soil erosion, slope failure, depletion of soil fertility, scarcity of fuelwood and fodder, increased landslides and the loss of biological diversity.

Women are the main users and collectors of forest products. The common edible wild fruits are Malu (*Bauhinia vahii*), Chalta (*Dillenia indica*), Amla (*Emblca officinalis*), Bankaphal (*Fragaria vesca*), Kaphal (*Myrica esculenta*) and Kilmora (*Barberis aristata*). Women also harvest these berries from forest for sale at local market and make a small contribution to the household income. Collecting fuel and fodder is an important daily chore for hilly women. Women go out to collect grass and leaves and on returning homes they do their household works which includes rearing of cattle and finally they put in a few hours of work on the land. Their knowledge of ecosystem is of a very high degree. Many of their customs very clearly show their deep knowledge, faith and love for their forest, for instance all the villages have at least one temple grove. These are preserved as gene pool and also are protected from wildlife to survive, their production system consists of settled and shifting cultivation, food gathering, hunting and fishing in a sustainable and controlled manner.

Today, when deforestation proceeding at a rapid pace, sacred groves are assuming more and more important role in the daily life of the local tribals as the only remaining source of forest produce. These women protect this biological diversity for such potential economic significance.

Water is most under-utilized at the same time most abundant resource of Himalayas. It is estimated that about 11,00,000 million cubic meter water flows every year down the Himalaya offering a potentiality of generating electricity to the total of 28,000 MW and making as much as 2, 47,000 million cubic meter water available for irrigation in the Indo-Gangetic plains (Valdiya, 1985).

Farmers demand water both to protect their crop and augment production. The water resources are conserved by canalizations mechanism in which stream are straightened and deepened to control the velocity of run-off and flooding and to improve navigation. The technique usually entails the removals of shrubs and tree up to 30m from the bank of the river with the denuded area then planted with a cover crop. Healthy soil is the foundation on which life depends. If the soil is healthy, then agriculture and pasturage will yield food in plenty.

In Uttarakhand crop rotation and strip cropping are used for soil conservation. In crop rotation farmers plant a regular sequence of crop on the same land, instead of growing same crop continuously or growing different crops in haphazard order. Which brings enormous benefits by raising the soil holding power of the land. It reduces the soil erosion, it adds nitrogen and other nutrients to the soil, it helps to maintain the supply humus and improves the quality of crop.

Women's Energy Crisis: -

Energy is essential for human well-being and forms the driving power of economic development. Within household energy is needed to cook food, to boil water, to heat and light the home. These are all women's tasks performed everywhere in Uttarakhand. Mostly domestic energy in third world comes directly from biomass sources. Wood fuel, and other biofuels such as animal and crop residues, are the main sources of energy for some 2,500 million people or roughly half the world's population (World resources, 1986).

In Uttarakhand the burden of the fuel wood crisis is borne by women, because they have the responsibility for meeting house hold energy needs through fuel collection, preparation and use. Children especially girls help their mother with these tasks. They take part in fire wood collection, cooking and tending the fire.

Fuel and food are complementary needs. Most food particularly the whole grains and legume staples on which the rural diets are based, are inedible without some cooking. Less fuel consuming cooking methods can save as much or more energy. There are two basic solutions to rural energy crisis: increasing wood supply and improving cooking efficiency, and popularizing non-conventional energy devices (solar cooker, grain driers and solar lanterns).

Managing Fragile Ecosystem: -

Mountain ecosystem is an important source of biological diversity, water and mineral resources, forestry and recreation from important economic activities in many mountain areas. Mountain ecosystem are susceptible to accelerated soil erosion, landslides and rapid loss of habitat and generic diversity. In Uttarakhand, areas growing degradation is causing widespread poverty among local inhabitants. Hence, proper management of water resources and socio-economic development deserves high priority.

Mountain habitats bear a rich variety of ecosystems. A single mountain slope may include tropical, subtropical and temperate climate each representing microcosms of habitat diversity. The conservation and sustainable development of mountain resources requires as a priority of generation and strengthening of the knowledge base mountain ecosystem and promotion of watershed development.

As a priority, existing institutions at national and regional levels should be strengthened so as to generate a multidisciplinary ecological knowledge based on mountain ecosystem and identify hazardous areas

that are most vulnerable to erosion, floods, and landslides, this would require the establishment of meteorological and hydrological monitoring systems.

Environmental Protection Movements in Uttarakhand: -

A powerful environment movement has grown up on the slopes of mountains of Himalayas. Villagers have created an effective non-violent way to stop devastation by forest industries. When the axe-man comes, the people form ring (circle) around the tree- they embrace the tree. This has given the movement its name the Chipko movement.

Chipko movement was born in a small hilly village of upper reaches of Himalayas. The village women commenced this unique movement in December, 1973 that becomes famous as the Chipko (means to hug) movement, the movement commenced in a village near Mandal town, Chamoli-Garhwal district of Uttarakhand, next major movement occurred in 1974 near the village of Reni, where more than 2,000 trees were scheduled to be felled for commercial purpose. Following a large student- led demonstration, the government summoned the men of the surrounding villages to a nearby city for compensation, ostensibly to allow the loggers to proceed without confrontation. However, they were met with the women of the village, led by Gaura Devi, who refused to move out of the forest and eventually forced the loggers to withdraw. The action in Reni prompted the state government to establish a committee to investigate deforestation in the Alaknanda valley and ultimately led to a 10-year ban on commercial logging in the area.

This movement actually gather momentum in 1978 when women faced police firing. The women of the Advani village of Tehri Garhwal tied the sacred thread around the trees, actually hugged the trees faced police firing in Feb, 1978 and later courted arrest. The movement continued under the leadership of Sri Sunder Lal Bahuguna in various villages like Advani and Budhekar of Tehri-Garhwal. Mr. Bahuguna presented the plan of this movement for protection of soil and water through ban on the tree falling in the Himalayas at the UNEP meeting held in London in June, 1982. Every standing green tree in the forest is a sentry to protect us from avalanches and landslides, to save our soils and conserve our water.

The Chipko's plan is infect a slogan of planting five F's – food, fodder, fuel, fibre and fertilizer tree to make community self-sufficient in all their basic needs. It should generate a decentralized, self-renewing and long-term prosperity. It will protect the environment and bring permanent peace, prosperity and happiness to mankind.

The Chipko movement became an inspiration to many activities and gave rise to the movements like Appiko, Narmada bachao, Save Western ghats, Jungle Jeevan bachao and many others in different parts of the India. Centuries before the Chipko movement a prototype had taken place in Bisnoi village called khejarli where 294 men and 69 women sacrificed their lives to protect their forest from the soldiers of king Abhay Singh of Jodhpur who had come to cut and take away trees from their forests. In a small village called Turia in Seohi district of Madhya-Pradesh, people revolted when their right of grazing was denied by the British Forest Department, even at the cost of rise lives people struggle their rights. The tribal revolutionaries in and around in the Bhimashankar area where fighting for their rights over natural resources in the beginning of twentieth century. People from Narmada valley also fought for their natural resources.

The International Response: -

There are well over 100 international agreements and instruments dealing with the environmental matter and governments find it increasingly difficult to keep up with the international regulatory process and to implement it nationally. At the same time world-wide coverage participation and compliance has become increasingly important o sustainable development and environmental security.

By 1975 international organizations prompted by the UN decade for Women, had begun to look at the role of women in development. In 1975, UN decided that the entire decade would be devoted to intensified action to promote equality between men and women, to ensure the full integration of women in the local development efforts and to increase women's contribution on the strengthening the world peace.

A world conference on the international women year was held in Mexico in 1975, adopted a world action plan to implement the objectives of the year and proclaimed the period 1976-85 as UN decade for women. Another world conference was held in Copenhagen in 1980 mid-way through the decade and an action plan for the next five years was agreed upon. In July, 1985 the world conference to review and appraise the achievement of UN decade for women equality, development and peace was held in Nairobi. Representatives of several human agencies including UNEP, UNDP and WHO focused on the relationship between women and the environment and the problem of environment degradation poses for them.

At ICUN's 16th general assembly in Madrid in 1984 a recommendation was put forward to guarantee better representation of women and women's issues in its works. As then the President, Mohammad Kassas said *'we are yet to achieve true participation of women in the work of the union. Few women aere invited to lead discussion at this general assembly and I would like us to look into the prospects and means for bringing women all over the world in to the movement. Let us all take this mission to the heart'*.

II. Conclusion: -

Thus, scanning the role of women in protecting environment in Uttarakhand, it is observed that no other group is more affected by environmental destruction than the women. The true problem of natural hazards like soil erosion, deforestation, landslides, floods and heavy and high siltation in rivers etc. will also be taken care off by using proper management techniques with the active involvement of women folk. Folkers were derived through myths and legends, dreams, spiritual divinations, story-telling, and cultural ceremonies. Folkers influence utilization levels of wild biotic resources and provide a resource of recreation among youths, an example being moonlight story telling in the village communities.

The Chipko movement created a strong opinion to value the forest for their ecological role and for support they give to the local people livelihood by providing food, fodder and fuel.

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