
UNIT 1 PEASANT AND WORKING CLASS FEMINISM

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

The dominant stereotype that persists in society is that men are producers and women are reproducers. According to August Babel (1975, p.4), women are the first human beings to taste bondage and women were the first slaves. Scholars like Maria Mies (1998) and Gail Omvedt (1977) have explored the life worlds of peasant women. The subjective and objective dimensions of the peasant women's conditions are important and it will help you to understand their affinities or detachments related to peasant movements.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the formation and historical background of peasant and working class women in India;
- State the trajectory of the various movements based on peasant and working class; and
- Analyze the social stratifications that determine the assertion of peasant and working class women.

1.3 DEFINING PEASANT AND WORKING CLASS

It is important to understand the concepts related to the categories such as peasantry and working class. This exercise that engages with the definitions of these categories will help us to locate the linkages that exist between gender, and the peasantry and working class.

The category of peasant is contested. It refers to diverse sections such as share croppers, rich small holders, landless labourers and sections such as feudal tenants. These are dealt within the Marxist theoretical tradition. The revolutionary agency of the peasantry is very much part of the Marxian analysis. Marxist scholars link feudal tenants to the world of peasant economies. This approach explores the conditions that determine the location of rural day labourers, feudal tenants and independent farmers. Peasants and their life worlds are explored in the context of consumption/production, capitalist/non-capitalistic agriculture and the exploitation of impoverished producers in agriculture. The mode of production plays a vital role in the class location of peasant. Anthropological readings on peasantry focus on the role of norms and values, predicaments on tradition, nature of vision and so on. In other words, norms, values, tradition and vision of peasantry are studied in the field of anthropology.

The working class is the class which has to sell its labour power for survival. Marx called this category as the “proletariat.” The sale of labour power within a particular time determines the wage of the labourer. But, there are differences in the category of working class based on market conditions and work. The labour contract too decides the nature of the subordinate location of the working class. Blue collar occupations and manual jobs determine the social space of working class. The working class is not a homogenous category. Rather, there are differences in the location and social mobility of the working class. Skill determines the social mobility of the working class. Those who are skilled are more privileged than the unskilled. The section that exists between skilled and unskilled are the semiskilled. Those who are part of the primary market and secondary market also have a different trajectory. Changing needs and demands in labour market result in poverty. Primary market and secondary markets are the two entities of labour market. Primary market is determined by the requirements of the workers. It has good jobs with career prospects. It also has proper pension schemes, full time employment and good pay. Those who are part of the primary labour market are socially mobile and better paid than those who work in the secondary labour market. The Primary labour market is composed of skilled labourers. On the other hand, secondary

market provides low social mobility, part time jobs. It does not provide pension. Those workers in the secondary market are vulnerable to multiple forms of exploitation and exclusion. The marginalized sections are very much part of the secondary labour market. For instance, workers who belong to the subordinate classes, castes, races and gender are part of the secondary labour market. They do not have the access to paid vacations, standardized labour contracts, pensions and entitlements, and other forms of social security. Unemployment and under-employment are the salient features of those workers who are situated within the secondary labour market. The working class in the first world faces the threat of automation. Rapid technological changes call into question the day to day work of the labourers. The primary markets and manufacturing sectors also undergo rapid changes in the developing society. The shrinking of those sectors affects the working class in such countries.

Scholars who belong to the school of subaltern studies positioned the category of peasant in a different theoretical fashion. **Ranajit Guha** (1983), one of the path breaking founders of the school, emphasized the historiography of the peasant and peasant insurgency in colonial India as seen 'from below'. Thus, a subaltern study re-reads the peasant (subaltern) resistance and its representation in the colonial historiography. Subaltern studies focused on the impact of caste system in agrarian milieu and resistance. It explored the dimensions of peasants and their movements in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial period. "Subaltern" is a category that signifies subordination. **Partha Chatterjee** is one of the important scholars who contributed to the field of subaltern studies. He provided the subaltern interpretation of the peasant world and caste system. He criticized the Marxian analysis of the peasantry as a particular way of reading that reduces the caste system to a superstructural epiphenomenon. He contended that this reading was a particular kind of Marxist distortion. According to Partha Chatterjee (1983) both base and superstructure contribute to the shaping of caste system. He argues that religion acts as a form of consciousness which helps the subalterns to oppose the dominant forces. For instance, Mayan peasants in the Chiapas of Mexico argue that they are people of corn. In other words, corn stands for their struggle. Tom Brass (1991) criticized subaltern studies for its construction of rural producers as uniform and he equates it with the approach of populism.

Three agencies such as *Sarkari* (government), *Sahukari* (money lending) and *Zamindari* (landlordism) controlled the lives of the peasants in India. These agencies are active in the exploitation of the peasantry. However, the peasantry in contemporary-neoliberal India is experiencing the retreat of

state from agriculture, lack of proper policies, the penetration of capitalist forces in the field of agriculture, “NGO-ization” and the consequential depoliticization of peasant agency, recurring suicides in agrarian communities, rapid technological change and so on.

Now that we have obtained some understanding of the categories of peasant and working class, let us look at these within a historical perspective in the next section.

1.4 HISTORY OF PEASANT AND WORKING CLASS FEMINISM

In the section above, we learnt about how the categories of peasant and working class have been defined by various scholars in the field. In this section, we will examine these categories in a historical framework as well as in relationship to women and feminism. Some of the issues to be covered here include the condition of Indian women, their relationship to labour, and to agriculture.

The independence related struggle about the peasantry in our country took place in 1857. It was an unorganised feudal peasant struggle against the colonizers that was led by feudal lords. The emergence of leadership among peasants happened only after the formation of *Kisan Sabhas*.

Uday Mehta (1979) has classified peasant movements in terms of the following three phases:

- 1) **Initial phase**- The sporadic growth of peasant movements in the absence of organized and proper leadership emerged in the period, 1857-1921.
- 2) **Second phase**- During the period 1923-46, an organized form of *Kisan Sabhas* created consciousness among the peasants. The salient feature is that peasant movements were led by people and they gave importance to the problems of peasant in the national question.
- 3) **Post-Independence phase**- Agrarian movements became assertive due to the ruling parties’ incompetence to foreground the problems of Indian peasantry. It was broadly mobilized by leftist parties and in the late seventies and eighties, it became the discourse of some other autonomous farmers’ organization (Cited in Solomon, 1982, p.3).

The tremendous peasant assertions, according to **Maria Mies** is a part of “the deepening economic crisis which affects the peasants and more brutally than urban middle class” (Mies, 1976, p.472). The agendas of the peasant

movements were land to the tiller, higher prices for farm produces, write off farmers' loans, and so on. Militant peasant assertions were neutralized by clashes, firings and deaths.

1.4.1 Tracing Indian Women's Location in the Social System

The social stratification of women in India is contested. They are fragmented on the basis of class, caste, region, sexual orientation and so on. The condition of women in India is determined by the ambiguous overlapping of class and caste. The specificity of their location that is determined by caste and class accelerate the divisiveness and the lack of solidarity among them. They are situated at two levels of existence. One is that both of them are oppressed by the patriarchal ideology that is prevalent in India. The second one is that they also belong to different classes and castes. There are divisions within the caste and it intersects with class in a complicated fashion. Women who belong to different classes and castes internalize the dominant ideology of caste and class and become the victims of a persisting patriarchal ideology that is conditioned through caste and class. Thus, they reproduce a sense of false consciousness related to the supposed superiority and inferiority of their social worlds. The sense of superiority and inferiority of their specific caste-class locations also decides their sexual/social labour. It is important to understand the contestations of labour and women in India.

1.4.2 Women and Labour

As we mentioned earlier, the social stratification of class and caste determines the nature of the women proletariat in India. It also determines the social recognition of labour. In other words, the labour of women is recognized through their social location. Nature of work determines the dignity and social mobility of the individual and communities. The situation is different in developing societies such as India. The social mobility of women in India is linked to caste and class stratification. The patriarchal ideology in India becomes an obstacle to the empowerment of women. There are links that exist between caste, class and gender. For instance, a woman who belongs to the higher class-caste strata of India is more socially mobile than the women who belong to the Adivasi and Dalit communities. Constitutional privileges in India have made an impact on the rights and privilege of the marginalized communities such as dalits and tribals. Still, they are marginalized from the mainstream milieu of power due to the persistence of caste. It will be interesting to understand the relationship of caste-class and gender through the social trajectory of the gendered-class-caste proletariat of India. For instance, midwives and washer women in India

belong to the lower caste-class. Their labour is conditioned through the caste-class ridden labour environment. Women from higher castes will never involve themselves in the stigmatized caste-class bound labour or occupations. Their labour thus is determined themselves through their social location in the caste-class hierarchy.

1.4.3 Politics, Agency and Women in India

Post-independent and pre-colonial India has witnessed a diverse political agency of plural and unequal women. In other words, the emergence of political agency in these two broader periods, that is pre-colonial and post-independent, is different in India. It is different because the existential predicaments of women belonging to different classes and castes are different in nature. It is unequal in nature due to their diverse social backgrounds. For instance, women who belonged to the higher strata in India participated in the freedom struggle against the British colonialism. It is interesting to note the distinctive nature of the political agency and the social milieu of those women. Women leaders like Sarojini Naidu represent a different trajectory from the women activists from the Dalit and tribal communities. They have a different perspective of the oppressor. Marginalized women had to face double oppression based on internal caste colonialism and external British colonialism. Thus, the stake of these marginalized women activists was distinct from leaders such as Sarojini Naidu. On the other hand, leaders such as Sarojini Naidu exemplify the path breaking women's political agency which was only aimed at the abolition of the British colonial-imperial rule. The difference in the political agency of women and its complexity can be found in the section on the history of the political agency of women.

1.4.4 Agrarian Conditions and Impact on Women

Joan.P. Mencher and **K. Sardamoni** argued that “No one has ever measured the amount of paddy harvested by a woman and that harvested by a man. In those parts of Kerala where harvesting is paid by a share of what is harvested, usually 1 to 6, one tends to find a larger proportion of harvesting done by females. Still, we have never heard a complaint from a landowner that women were not good at harvesting, or any claim that males could harvest more in a given period of time.”(Mencher & Saradamani,1982, p.155) The stereotype that men are better at agricultural work is conditioned by the patriarchal ideology that is prevalent in the field of peasantry.

The absence of women friendly implements as well as tools that can redeem women from their mundane and tiresome labour is important and vital to

end their exclusion from the labour that is determined by the patriarchal division of labour. Thus, it is practical to have new tools as well as implementations to (en)gender their social milieus.

The current status of women in the realm of agriculture impedes their agency as well as social mobility. In other words, they are not skilled in the area of agriculture except in using the plough. For instance, women who work in the farm are devoid of skills. They do not get a proper wage. Thus, they are exploited on a large scale. There is a dearth of proper training for women and thus they are marginalized from key aspects related to agriculture. They are forced to remain in a lesser position in their families, community and farms. Landless women are different from the aforementioned class-caste of women. Their status is totally different because they do not have technical skills and training. Simultaneously, their identities that are constructed through their caste cum class determine their growth. In the section below, we will look more closely at the role of women in peasant and working class feminist discourse through women's movements.

1.5 CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN IN PEASANT AND WORKING CLASS FEMINIST DISCOURSE THROUGH MOVEMENTS

Women participated in the **Bodhgaya struggle** for the land. They were mobilized by the *Chaatra Yuva Sangarsh Vahini* which is influenced by the ideology of Jayaprakash Narayan. The land was appropriated by Bodhgaya *Math*. The *Sangarsh Vahini* organised a demonstration of local labourers and peasants against the Bodhgaya *Math* authorities. Twenty four women from the different cities of Bihar participated in it. The slogan was “those who sow and plough the land are the owners of the land” (Manimala, 1984). The land was under the control of *Mahant*. It is important to understand the history of the *Mahant* system. The ‘*Shankar Math*’ is another name for the Bodhgaya *Math*. It is named as ‘*Shankar Math*’ because it was reconstructed by a person called Shankar. *Mahanti* tradition started after Ghamandiyi became the *Mahant* in 1590 AD. The *Math* became a renowned *Tantric* centre in the seventeenth century. Krishnadayal Giri, the *Mahant* transferred all the *Math* property, which was in his name, to a trust in 1932. He was the president of it. Dhansukh Giri became the *Mahant* in 1977. Internal conflicts were high during that period. All administrative rights were given to Darbari Jairam Giri due to the deteriorating health of previous *Mahant* Shatanand Giri. However, Jairam Giri divided the *Math* in to 20 Trusts and he became the president of the working committee of those

Trusts. It resulted in the conflict between the *Mahant* and the *Darbaris*. But, they were all together in the case of the appropriation of the land from the poor. They used all sorts of coercive measures to grab the land of the poor. These lands were controlled through Bodh Gaya *Math* and its *Kacheri*.⁵³ *Kacheris* existed in Gaya that time. It was managed by *Sanyasi* known as *Mudiya*. He was the representative of the *Math*. He is appointed by a *Mahant*. *Math* employed permanent labourers called *Kamiya*. They work in the fields of the *Math* and were given 15 kathas of land for cultivation. They were also paid for that work. The *Math* never gave them any receipts and they were not able to claim their rights under sharecropping laws. The *Mahants* occupied 9,575 acres of land in 138 villages, in 11 areas of Gaya district. Women were exploited by those who were part of the *Math*. At this juncture, labourer activists decided to reap lentil for themselves rather than giving it to the *Math* in November, 1978. The decision was made public by the activists. The lumpen brigade of the *Math* surrounded the entire field. But, courageous women entered the field and reaped the crop. Thus, women initiated the first political activity in Bodhgaya. It attracted women to that movement. They were conscious of the patriarchy that was very much part of their day to day life. They socially boycotted men who beat their wives. They were not allowed to sit in the village meetings. Women were successful in an anti-liquor agitation because they realized that alcoholism affects the financial condition of women. They were active in stopping liquor brewing. Thus, they created consciousness among women, men and children about the impacts of alcoholism. Women helped the labourers who were brutally attacked by ruffians of the *Math* on 8th August, 1979. Women protested against the atrocities of landlords. Women argued that their struggle have two dimensions, the right to land and the right to equality. Women challenged the police during the protest related to land. They were brutally beaten up by the police during the protest in 5th November 1980. Government identified the land that was illegally possessed by the *Math* in October 1981 and decided to distribute the land to landless labourers in places like Kusha, Munesarpur, Chakla, Jayrampur, Parsawa, Gosa Pesra and Kurmawa. Women argued that the land should be legally in their names. This is one of the significant moments in the history of the land struggle in Bodh Gaya. They did Gherao in front of the officers and raised this question.

The ***Tebhaga*** movement of sharecroppers started in undivided Bengal in 1946-47. It started after the great famine of 1943. The sharecroppers of that particular region did not have occupancy rights. They faced threats of eviction. The landlord exploited them by taking their produce. They also

levied illegal cess from the share croppers. At the same time, women were exploited by the landlords. The main slogan of this movement was 'land to the tiller'. It demanded a reduction in land rents from one-half to one-third of the crop share. It was organized by *Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha (BKPS)*. It was lead by Communist Party of India. Women's self- defence league or **MARS** (*Mahila Atma Raksha Samithi*) was also part of the struggle. It is important to understand the formation of MARS. It was founded in the year 1942. It was linked to the mobilization of Bengali women on the eve of Bengal famine. It gained its strength in 1943. Five thousand women from Calcutta and its suburban regions conducted a hunger-march to the Bengal Legislative Assembly to protest against the hike in prices. They also conducted marches in small towns of Bengal. It had branches in every district by May 1944. There was membership of 43,500 women belonging to working class, peasant, middle class, urban poor sections. Oppression on the basis of gender is related to caste, economy based oppression and agrarian conditions. Caste Hindu landlords regulated the lives of the women from share cropping house holds. Those women experienced sexual exploitation from the land lords. It is argued that rural-poor women faced the worst conditions. Both Hindu and Muslim women were very much part of this struggle. Women acted as the informers for the activists of the movement. They informed the activists about the arrival of the police. They made sounds or blew conch shells. They gave shelter and food to activists. Women also become messengers of the activists who worked in the market and other areas. There were *Nari Bhahinis* or *Mohilla Bahinis* (women's corps) to protect the village. Women who belong to poor sections were active in meetings and demonstration. They were also the members of the *Tebhaga* committee. These women were courageous and resisted arrests. They rescued people bravely. They used household devices used for husking, chopping woods, brooms, and knives to resist the attack of the police. They resisted the landlords who were harvesting paddy with the help of the police. Women used mixture of dust and chilli powder to attack the police. Many women were killed and got injured during the attacks of the police. They protested against wife beating in the *Tebhaga* peasant courts and branches of MARS. They argued that wife beating questions the integrity of the movement against the landlords. Their campaign against domestic violence provided new dimensions to the *Tebhaga* movement. Some of the peasants in the Muslim areas objected to the presence of women in the *Kisan Samitis*. Women argued that they also were part of the labour in the agrarian field and protested against such move by the males. However, it is argued that women were not part of the key bodies of BKPS or Communist party. Women's right to land was not discussed in an appropriate manner.

The **Telegana struggle** started in the year 1945. It was an armed struggle organized by the Communist Party of India in the rural part of Andhra Pradesh against the feudal regime. It stood for the cause of providing land to the peasant cultivators. It demanded hike in wages. It also addressed the abolition of forced labour and sexual exploitation of women. Three million men and women belonging to 3000 villages of the several districts of *Telegana* participated in this struggle. Landlords during the Nizam period exploited women. They sexually exploited women from the poor and vulnerable sections. They were kidnapped by the land lords. They were forced to submit themselves to the sexual advance of the landlords. Those women who were part of this movement belong to landless and middle class peasant backgrounds. They joined the movement to solve their land related issues. It was also an attempt to come out of the structure of oppressive family. Women in Andhra Pradesh participated in the *Telegana* struggle and challenged the barbaric rule of *razakars* during 1948-1950. They were active in rallies and strikes. Men found refuge in the forests for their activism during the bitter days of repression. Women remained in the family. Women used chilli powder, slings and pestles to defend themselves. Women carried messages by disguising themselves as boys. Ten thousand women participated in this struggle. They were repressed by the police. They were also brutally raped by the police and the landlords. But, leaders of *Telegana* showed a paternalistic attitude to women's question. Women were not allowed to work as guerrillas and asked to work as messengers, providing shelter and so on. Male leaders considered women as not capable of fighting with arms. They admitted that they were not interested to take women to the battle field. Thus, women who were part of the *Telegana* were alienated from the dominant patriarchal leadership. During *Telegana*, women guerrilla committees were formed and women fought against the *razakars* of Nizam. *Razakars* were the private Muslim Militia of Nizam. Some of them who were part of the guerrilla wing were asked to go back to family after the struggle. For instance, women were considered as a supportive part of the Communist party. A few among them only become party members. Women argue that they did everything for the struggle like their male counter parts. But, they were not given membership in the party. Women were watched by the male activists. They were criticized by the male activists for their mistakes. The question of separate land titles to women, domestic violence, dowry were never discussed in the party.

It will be interesting to understand the role of women activists of *Telegana* struggle through the life histories of some of those of women activists. **Mallu Swarajyam** is one of the pioneering woman activists who left an

indelible mark in the history of *Telegana* struggle. She was a vibrant guerrilla strategist, commander and communist party organizer of *Telegana* movement. She argued that she worked in the post-independent communist party as an extension of her guerrilla spirit. She was born in 1930 in a feudal family of Andhra Pradesh. She was part of the freedom movement at an early age. She was vocal about the inequality that determine the lives of the poor. Her mother influenced her humanist attitude. Swarajyam was influenced by Gandhiji and the salt satyagraha. Russian writers such as Maxim Gorky made an impact on her revolutionary perceptions. She used to read the banned newspaper of the communist party called *Prajashakthi*. Swarajyam attended the political class in the house of Arutla Kamala Devi, an activist of member of *Andhra Mahila Sabha*. That political class focused on playing and stick-fighting. She listened to the debates on the movement against forced labour from that class. Her family was against her affiliation with the Sabha. Her political activism was also linked to the *Andhra Mahasabha's* struggle against the dictatorial rule of the Nizam of Hyderabad. The *Mahasabha* declared political solidarity with oppressed classed, indigenous communities and their struggle against the feudal system. Her political activism had a cultural dimension too. She politicized the genre of cradle song called *Vuyyalo* as part of consciousness-raising. This particular genre was popular among the different castes and classes of rural Telegana region. These radical forms of "*Vayyalus*" created a new sense of revolutionary rigour among the comrades. One of her "*Viyyalu*" was about the cruelty of land lord Visnur Deshmukh Ramachandra Reddy in which she narrated the plight of a peasant woman after her child birth. It also dealt with the obstacles to care of her child. This song thus deals with the feudalism, oppression and its impact on a peasant woman. The peasant lady requests the landlord to allow her to take care of her child. But, the landlord sends his militia to physically harass her. This song explored the politics of feudalism and land relations. It dealt with the nuances of labour and suppression. This song advocated the oppressed to join the political collective that addresses the plight of toiling masses. Swarajyam became the member of *Andhra Mahila Sabha*, the women's wing of the *Mahasabha* in the year 1942 when she was twelve years old. This particular moment of her life signifies her passion for the revolutionary praxis. The peasant assertions of this particular moment was influenced by the struggle of a dalit woman named Ailamma against encroachment of her land by landlord Visnur Deshmukh in the year 1944. Swarajyam became the member of the communist party in 1946. Peasants were organized as village squads. Later, they were converted to guerrilla squads. Communists in Telegana under the leadership of P.Sunderayya mobilized the peasants and formed *gramraj*. It annihilated the practices

such as forced labour, usury and evictions. It also increased the wages for the workers. Swarajyam became the organizer for the struggle committee of Suryapet taluka in 1946. The committee was responsible to provide training to men and women. Their objective was to convert them into fighting units called *dalams*. Women were part of the land distribution committee. There were two women in that community. Swarajyam became a member of women's committee which focused on women's rights in 1945. It resisted wife beating, alcoholism and provided support to the women who suffered from patriarchal families. There were women's fighting units under the communist party. Swarajyam taught the activists how to escape themselves from the enemy. She was part of the successful struggle against the cruel landlords. She became the committee organizer for the tribal areas. She was an active guerilla in the Godavri forest region during 1948-51. This movement restored the land rights of the Koya tribals of that region. Swarajyam provides a new insight that addresses the questions of gender, working class and the oppressed peasantry.

Women played a role in environmental movements. They were assertive in the **Chipko movement**. It emerged in the Garhwal hills of northwest India. The Chipko movement was innovative way to prevent the cutting of trees. It was against the exploitation of forest that was owned by the government and the forest department and emerged in the year 1973. One village woman protested against the logging of a tract of oak forest related to the potato seed farm. Women protested because it would result in the loss of their source of fuel and fodder and would add five kilometers to their journey for fire wood. Women took the initiative to start vigilance against illegal felling. They also protested against the tree auctions. They also opposed alcoholism and domestic violence. They were conscious that their daily life was dependent on trees. Thus, women become more active in village meetings.

Women achieved allotment of a part of the village wasteland in a Sewamandir project in Rajasthan in the 1980s. They planted herbs and plants. But, they faced opposition from the local government officials. There was no provision of a land registration related to women. Women in the Bankura region of West Bengal organized *samitis* or societies for the reclaiming of the waste land for sericulture which was started in 1988. There were 1500 women from thirty six villages. They formed a society of their own. Landless women in Bangladesh too cultivated crops in the waste land.

Women were part of the landless labourer's movement in Karimnagar district during the sixties. They started agitating against the kidnapping of Devamma and the murder of her husband by a local landlord.

In Kerala, women were organised under *Kisan Sabhas* and the *All Kerala Mahila Sangam*. They were an active part of conscience building, supporting the underground activities of fellow revolutionaries and so on. Women became martyrs during their struggle against the diabolic activities of the dewan, Sir C.P.Ramaswamy Aiyer. **Susheela Gopalan** is one of the pioneering woman communist leaders. She is renowned for her mobilization of workers who were part of coir manufacturing units. She played an important role in the foundation of the coir worker's co-operative society. She started the Coir workers Centre in 1971. She was the president of that centre. There were women leaders from the adivasi and dalit communities of Kerala. **Mayilamma** is one of the brilliant adivasi woman leaders from Kerala. She fought against the Coco-Cola plant at Plachimada. The struggle in Plachimada symbolizes the agency of adivasi women and their struggle to reclaim their right to water. Natives of Plachimada faced an acute shortage of water after the installation of the Coco-Cola plant. Mayilamma mobilized the indigenous communities and faced brutal repression from the police-cum-political party nexus of Kerala. She died on 6, January 2007. **C.K.Janu** is another prominent woman leader from the adivasi community of Kerala. She founded the social movement called *Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha (AGMS)*. She is one of the contemporary icons of the adivasi assertion in Kerala who succeeded in creating a dalit-adivasi alliance. She faced oppression from the police during her struggle for land rights at Muthanga. The emergence of Janu as a political leader symbolizes the political consciousness of Adivasi women which is based on the ideology of right to land and natural resources. Her movement became a pressure group within the political sphere of Kerala.

In Punjab, poor peasant woman **Raghubir Kaur** was elected to the Punjab assembly in 1937. She mobilized peasant women in the rural areas. In March 1943, an *All Indian Kisan Sabha* held a separate conference for women. Sikh as well as Muslim women participated in it. The Warli peasant uprising happened in Thane, Maharashtra in the 1940s. Godawari Parulekar was a prominent woman activist in this uprising.

Tribal Bhil labourers in Shahada, Dhulia district in Maharashtra were also part of the tribal resistance against the exploitative landlords. **Bhil women** were also part of the anti-alcohol agitation at Shahada in 1972. They entered liquor dens and destroyed all bottles of liquor. They were vocal about the drinking attitudes and oppressive character of their husbands. They also challenged the lumpens who were employed on the liquor barons.

Women who were part of different trades in the informal economy were mobilized by the Self-Employed Women's Association (**SEWA**). This was founded by **Ela Bhatt** in the year 1972. She worked with the Gandhian women trade union called Textile Labour Association.

There are different views on the conditions of sex workers. On the one hand, their social location is determined by their labour and specific gender identity. At the same time, they are marginalized labourers who are involved in stigmatized sex related labour linked to the commoditization of the bodies of the women. The stereotypes about them could not help them to transcend their stigmatized past even after their rehabilitation. Thus, rehabilitation is questioned through the complicated nature of sex work, stigma, gender, class, labour and so on. It is important to understand that there are differences in the opinion of the sex worker activists. For instance, *Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee's* 'Sex Workers Manifesto' deals with the various dimensions of the sex workers' assertions. They argue that sex workers movement have raised questions about social systems and determinations, interconnected milieus of class, gender and sexuality and ethics of politics/morality. They began with a biographical sketch of their movement. It emerged as a collective of health workers of STD/HIV intervention programme at Sonagachi, Calcutta in the year 1992. Sonagachi is one of the largest and oldest red light areas of Calcutta. Initially, that programme created a sense of belonging and support among them. It helped them to look at themselves as a collective force whose lives are determined by specific social, ideological and political conditions. They contend that the distribution of condoms and the idea of safe sex is related to nuances of their lives that are determined by their customers, pimps and related other anti-social elements. This manifesto also deals with how the nature of motherhood, ideologies of love, and coupledness affect the sexual behaviour. They asserted that they founded *Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee* as an exclusive forum for sex workers. It was a forum to engage with their experiences and to articulate material marginality and societal ostracization. They declared their identity as sex workers in public spaces. They made their deliberations on the potentials and pitfalls of sex work. They opine that sex work is an occupation, not a moral condition. They are vocal about the developmental agencies that patronize their subjectivity. They are critical about the politics of rehabilitation that do not understand the complexities of their lives. They also argued that they are exposed to the moral policing of the society. According to them, society views sex workers as a homogenized category that provides sex related services. They consider these sort of perceptions as reductionist and detrimental to their

lives. They are considered a threat to public health, societal order, sex related morality and the civic system. They are conscious of being objects of pity, excluded from the dominant paradigms of citizenship. A sex worker is more oppressed than any other worker due to the above mentioned labour and gender bound specificities. They also expose the cultural industry as one which reproduces the ideology of women as a sexual object. The same ideology influences the human search for desires that are not confined to the categories of monogamy. They believe in a democratized family rather than the oppressive family which reproduces categories such as “chaste wife” and “fallen women.” They argue that their labour is equal to that of any other labour. They are different in the case of physical labour, occupational hazards such unwanted pregnancy, sex related diseases and so on. It is part of their livelihood. Their movement redefines perceptions about gender, poverty, sexuality and so on. It also provides them material and symbolic aspects related to their life worlds. Questions related to nuances of labour power affect the life chances of those who engage in sex work. This question has not been explored by this group in a detailed manner. However, it is also contended as a political collective against the repressive patriarchal ideology that stereotypes them as fallen women. Male sex workers are also part of this movement.

Women in Nepal were oppressed due to the excessive involvement of men in their public life. They were oppressed in every respect. Most of their activities were under the surveillance of the Nepali men. Women demanded a separate space for their meeting. They got allotted it from the Panchayat in the year 1988. For instance, **Nipani beedi workers’ struggle** was against the *Devadasi* system. Thus, it stood for the self dignity related to women and work.

In the above section, you have obtained a comprehensive view on the important role played by women activists in peasant and working class movements. Let us now attempt a brief overview of some current debates that are significant to peasant and working class feminism in the contemporary scenario.

1.6 CURRENT DEBATES IN PEASANT AND WORKING CLASS FEMINISM

Peasant and working class women are fragmented in contemporary India. Social strata based on caste, class, region proliferate the fragmentations. At the same time they are facing the challenges of the retreat of the nation-state from social security. They are also becoming the victims of development induced displacement that is driven by neo-liberal ideology.

Their political agency is repressed by the repressive state apparatus. The oppression of the dalit-advansi-women working class in Nandigram, Plachimada, Muthanga and so on demonstrate the brutal dimensions of the repression of their assertions. Identity politics and the NGO-ization of the social movements accelerate the gap that exist between the different sections of women. They think that leadership from their community can only address their issues in a positive manner. Thus, they are caught in a complicated gendered political milieu. The differences as well as solidarities symbolize the diverse ways of engendering democracy.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit tried to explore the intersections of peasant /working class identities among women. It dealt with their struggle in the various movements in India and contribution towards the peasant and working class. We have critically analysed questions such as: What conflicts exist between peasants and ideological/repressive state apparatus? Has male leadership in the peasant assertions-movements addressed the question of women? These questions have been discussed by locating women's issues and concerns in the historical context of peasant movements.

1.8 GLOSSARY

- Agency** : Human action and its impact on actors; ability to take action.
- Capitalism** : This refers to an economic system that subjects wage labour and commodity production for sale. It is also associated with exchange and profit. It does not immediately address the needs of the producers. It is a principle as well as the means of industrialization. It abounds with private property, free-competitive market and involvement of workforce in employment in the private sector. It promotes the idea of free market of small scale entrepreneurs who are competent to hire individual labourers for minimum cost. It also expects profit maximization through this sort of an arrangement. It focuses on the production for profit and private property that is partially controlled by the state. Sociologists such as Max Weber explored the category of wage labour and market exchange as one of the key aspects of capitalism. Capitalist systems are based on

calculated rationality, achieving wealth through deferred gratification and separation of the economic and social conditions.

Colonialism : Colonialism refers to the political order imposed by the developed countries on Asia, Africa, Australasia and Latin America. It began with the penetration of white populations of Spain, Portugal, Britain, France and Netherlands during the fifteenth century and their entry to Asia and Africa in the nineteenth century. They exploited native resources. It was racist and ethnocentric in nature. It also contained the idea of civilizing mission to hide its exploitative nature.

Endogamy : It is the selected or prescribed practice of marriage within the boundaries of kin-group, clan, lineage, village and social class. The opposite of endogamy is called as exogamy in which the prescribed marriage will be outside the in-group.

Feudalism : This term is contested. It refers to the political system of western European institutions during the middle ages. It is also applied to refer to the landholding in the seventeenth century England. Marc Bloch explored the relationship between feudalism-vassalage. According to him, the features of feudalism are succession based on hereditary, the mode of providing land by lords to their vassals, split in the authority and limited/taxable self-disciplining peasantry. Max Weber linked it with patrimonial power and struggle related to rent.

Labour : According to Karl Marx, labour not only produces commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity. It is identical with wage-labour. It is conceptualized as the conflicting realm of the labour and class in Marxian scholarship. Labour refers to the working class and exploitation of the labour power by the capitalist class. Marx argues that if labour is value, wage is private property. Thus, laborer belongs to one whom he labors. Working class is not homogenous and the decomposition of labour happens due to their stratification of their skills.

Skill : Skill refers to the manual and mental techniques that have to be acquired through training and schooling. It is also associated with aptitude.

1.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What are some definitions of peasant and working class that help us to understand these terms? Explain in your own words based on your reading of the relevant sections.
- 2) How is the women's question addressed in the peasant movement of India? Try to use specific examples from the unit to formulate your response.
- 3) How has the history of peasant and working class movements been influenced by peasant and working class feminism? Analyze the relationship between the two based on what you have read.
- 4) What are the various aspects of peasant and working class feminist discourse? Explain their contribution with examples.
- 5) Given the current debates in peasant and working class feminism, what are your thoughts about the future course of related movements in India? Try to think about this issue in the context of the historical background that has been presented to you in the above unit.

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UNIT 2 DALIT AND BLACK FEMINISM

Smita Patil

Structure

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Objectives
- 2.3 Formation of Dalit Feminism
- 2.4 History of Dalit Women's Movement
 - 2.4.1 Jotirao Phule
 - 2.4.2 Shahu Maharaj
 - 2.4.3 Babasaheb Ambedkar
- 2.5 Dalit Patriarchy : Critique of Dalit Leaders
 - 2.5.1 Land Struggle Movement
 - 2.5.2 Dalit Panther Movement
 - 2.5.3 Namantar (Re-naming) Movement
- 2.6 Debate on Dalit Women's Representation and Autonomy
- 2.7 Formation of Black Feminism
 - 2.7.1. History of Black Feminism
 - 2.7.2. Understanding the Solidarity and Critique of Black Feminist Discourse
- 2.8 Current Debates in Black Feminism
- 2.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.10 Glossary
- 2.11 Unit End Questions
- 2.12 References
- 2.13 Suggested Readings

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Dalit feminism is the response to the mainstream feminist debate by dalit women. According to them mainstream feminism in India never addressed the relationship between caste and gender. It was developed by the educated middle class dalit women at the primary stage in Maharashtra and later taken up at the national level. Similarly, black feminism is the voice of Afro- American women articulating issues which were never raised by the white feminists. In other words, race was not in the analysis of white feminist movements. Unlike dalit women, the black feminist claims that the issues of Afro-American women are marginal and kept behind in the larger periphery in hegemonic discourse of United States, white women. The black feminists not only postulated their oppression based on gender, race and class but also criticized the black patriarchal structure. They explored the historicity of the slavery system in term of economic exploitation, production/ income, resources and the sexual exploitation of black women. First, we will engage with dalit feminism and then move to black feminism.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the formation and historical background of dalit feminism in India and black feminism among Afro-Americans;
- Trace the genealogy of the movements based on caste and race;
- Analyse the factors which are oppressive towards dalit and black feminist development; and
- Identify certain issues and tensions among dalit and black feminists in the present context.

2.3 FORMATION OF DALIT FEMINISM

The National Federation of Dalit Women formed in the 1990s in state of Maharashtra and on 11th August 1995 at the national level at New Delhi. They questioned the foundations of mainstream feminism in India. They argued that the questions of class and gender have been the only priority of feminist discourse of India. The question of caste and gender was marginalized in their approach of mainstream feminism. According to dalit feminists, mainstream feminist movement is hierarchical, brahmanic and dominated by upper castes. Dalit feminists contend that they are triply exploited based on caste, class and gender. Dalit women are oppressed through external and internal patriarchy. In other words, internal patriarchy stands for the oppression of dalit women by dalit men. External patriarchy means that they are oppressed by non-dalit men and non-dalit women. The day to day violence and discrimination on the basis of caste is part of the external patriarchy. The most evident example of this might be that dalit women are subjected to rape because they belong to dalit community/ caste. At the same time, Dalit feminists argue that the patriarchy which is existing within their own/dalit community needs to be interrogated. We will examine these debates in the writings of Dalit women's autobiography in the latter part of this unit.

2.4 HISTORY OF DALIT WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The dalit feminists claim that their history starts from the 19th and 20th century. They argue that Jotirao Phule, Chattrapati Shahu Maharaj and Babasaheb Ambedkar, as discussed in the sub-sections below, were the main leaders who fought against oppression of caste, gender and patriarchy.

2.4.1 Jotirao Phule

Phule started the first school for girls in the year 1848 at *Bheedewada* in Budhwarpet at Pune. But, the challenge before him was to find a teacher for the girl students. Therefore, Jotirao Phule trained his wife Savitribai as

a teacher. At Normal school under Madam Michal and Miss Farrar, Savitribai completed her course as school instructor/teacher from Ahmadnagar and Pune, and became the first women teacher in the history of Maharashtra. Savitribai and Jotirao dedicated their lives to end the inequality of women and untouchables through the caste system. They started the first school for untouchable girls in 1848. Phule established two more schools for girls, one each in 1851 and 1852. The school that opened at *Nanapeth* in 1851 was path breaking in nature. Savitribai Phule faced discriminations from the orthodox Brahmins. They threw stones and cow-dung at her. They also alleged that she was immoral to stop her from teaching.

Phule argued that education is important to redeem women and untouchables from exploitation. Phule initiated the night schools and adults' school to address the aspirations of those students who were excluded from the mainstream schooling. During 1848-1852, Phule started around twenty schools at Pune. Phule focused on education to liberate lower caste and women. He liked the interventions of colonisers in the terrain of education. He approached the British colonizers to make them understand about the plight of education among the vulnerable sections. Thus, he exposed dominance and power of the Brahmins in the field of education.

2.4.2 Shahu Maharaj

Shahu Maharaj played a very important role in the creation and amendment of laws. In fact, Shahu contributed to the discourse of gender relations in Maharashtra. He was sympathetic towards the education of lower caste girls. He founded an autonomous school for girls from the Chamar and Dhor castes. They were marginalized in the case of education. He declared an amount of rupees ninety-six to be spent on women's education. The budget for a couple of years and some consolidated amount were provided for lower class girl students by order of Shahu. He declared fee concessions to girl students. Shahu Maharaj revised the Hindu Code Bill that consisted of inheritance of property by women, conjugal rights of husband and wife, adaptation laws, adaptation process, rules and definition of joint families, and equal distribution of property.

Upper castes such as Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras gave a share of their property to their children. But this was not practiced among the untouchables. They were not entitled to property. Therefore, it was a case of further exclusion among the untouchables. The law amended by Shahu asserted that every child should get a share of the inheritance or property irrespective of the caste of the child. At the same time, while claiming property, the child should be at least eight years old. He encouraged inter-caste marriages between religion/communities. He contended that such marriages should have legal validity. He focused on the promotion of inter

caste marriages to abolish the caste system. During 1920s, at Nagpur Speech, Shahu Maharaj argued that marriage out side the caste and community can only break the hegemony of Brahmins.

According to Shahu Maharaj, the family was the most oppressive system for the women. Oppression was also linked to the lack of education in India. It is connected to the attitude to women. Hindu religion also legitimized the oppression of women in the domestic spheres. Women were oppressed within the family in many ways. Illiteracy perpetuates the stereotypes of women. The family acts as a structure that legitimizes physical and psychological harassments of women by their husbands and other relatives. Thus, Shahu was conscious of the ideology of family and class. He emphasized that only education can liberate women from the oppressive systems of the society.

2.4.3 Babasaheb Ambedkar

Ambedkar empowered untouchables and women through his outstanding intellectual discourse and practice. He was greatly influenced by Phule and Shahu. Ambedkar was born on 14 April in the year 1891. He fought against the system that perpetuates caste based inequality. Ambedkar added a brilliant dimension to the movement of the untouchables through his relentless struggle. He considered the potentials of democracy to address the issues of the untouchables. Ambedkar organised his first conference on caste at Saswad in the year 1903 with one of the prominent activists of Maharashtra, Janba Kamble. He also participated in two conferences of untouchables in 1920. He was the president in the first conference held at Mangaon in Kolhapur State. The second conference of the depressed classes was held at Nagpur in 1920. Shahu Maharaj was the president of that conference. During the conference a resolution which addressed the cause of untouchables. However, the political discourse of Ambedkar questioned the entire ideology of caste and gender.

Ambedkar burned the *Manusmriti* during the Mahad conference in the year 1927. The Mahad Satyagraha was an attempt to gain the right to use public water sources. The *Manusmriti* legitimized the exploitative perspectives that oppress women and untouchables. The burning of *Manusmriti* represents the destruction of the power of Hindu religion. It is an act of rejecting Hindu religion. Ambedkar did his best to expose the concept of purity and pollution related to rights of untouchables to drinking water. He delivered a special speech for Dalit women at Mahad Satyagraha. Ambedkar encouraged them to join the anti-caste struggle. He argued that priority should be given to the women who were excluded from the male dominated domain of politics. Thus, he advised them to join the struggle to abolish untouchability along with Dalit men. He made a comparison between the dominant Brahmin

women with that of the oppression of the Dalit women in the public sphere. He made such a comparison to create political consciousness among Dalit women. He advised them to discard the stigmatized dress code; ornaments and occupations to annihilate the ideology of caste that was part of their day-to-day life. He argued that education is vital for the empowerment of the Dalit women. Thus, Dalit women declared their affinity to the perspectives of Ambedkar by passing their resolution in that meeting. Ambedkar succeeded in creating consciousness among dalit women.

Ambedkar in his work *Castes in India* (1976), delineated the linkages that exist between the three important stratifications of caste, gender and patriarchy. Ambedkar contended that social scientists paid scant attention to the institution of caste. Caste is produced through the prohibition of inter-marriage and limiting of the membership. Indians are divided on the basis of endogamy. The persistence of endogamy from time immemorial reveals the primitive mosaic of Indian society. On the other hand, exogamy i.e marrying outside the caste negates marriage within the same caste and further de-legitimizes the caste system. Therefore, intermarriage becomes a taboo in the Indian society. The dominant communities always prevented it. Dominant sections punish those who violate caste endogamy. Thus, caste is maintained through promoting endogamy and blocking intermarriage. It is controlled through the marriage. The sudden death of wife or husband challenge endogamy. Those women or men who exist after the death of husband or wife may become surplus in the society. In other words, they may indulge in remarriage or incest. Women are forced to undergo burning by themselves in the pyre of the husband. Men are asked to undergo self induced celibacy. Hence, caste, gender and patriarchy is exercised through endogamy.

Ambedkar in his pioneering work *The rise and fall of the Hindu Women* (2004) contends that Brahmins consider women and *Shudras* as inferiors. He further argues that the gender equality that existed before Manu changed due to the patriarchal ideology of the period of Manu. In other words, Manu justified the Brahmanical value systems to construct an organised and hierarchical social order. Manu dismissed the Buddhist tradition that gives representation to the women as heretical. Consequently, Ambedkar rejected this act of Manu by structuring the Hindu code bill for women in the post-independent period.

The Hindu code bill addresses the law of maintenance, divorce, marriage, adoption, minority and guardianship. The bill also considers the equal distribution of inheritance to the widow, daughter and widow of the pre-deceased son. It considered females as heirs of property.

Ambedkar was very much concerned about the status of Dalit women. For example, Ambedkar in his speech on 4 July 1936 at Mumbai argues that the women who are involved in these sexuality related professions are living with out dignity. In other words, they are carrying the stigmatized caste bound labour. Thus, he advised them to discard such scorned jobs and find employment with dignity in the society. Ambedkar encouraged them to leave Hindu religion that justifies such caste based occupation and to embrace Buddhism that is structured on gender equality. According to Ambedkar, conversion will provide them self respect. It is also important to understand the popular nature of the meetings conducted by Ambedkar. Almost 25,000 Dalit women delegates participated in the second session of the All India Depressed Classes women's conference conducted on 20 July 1942 at Nagpur. Ambedkar contended that development and progress can be measured from the social mobility of women from dalit community. He supported the building up of political consciousness among dalit women. He asserted that dalit women should focus on the education of their children. Thus, he cultivated the sense of aspiration among them. At the same time, he was conscious of the burden of patriarchal institutions such as marriage on dalit women. It is considered as one of the step to have a secure life of dalit women. Ambedkar also argued that dalit women should be treated with respect among their families.

Dalit women accepted Ambedkar as their pioneering leader. They elected Shantabai Dani as president of Scheduled Caste Federation at the Nasik conference. The second conference of Scheduled Caste Federation was held in 1944 at Kanpur and the third at Bombay in which Minambal Shivraj was president.

Box 2.1

Activity: Reflect on some of the similarities and differences in the approaches of the three dalit leaders based on what you have read so far. Write these down and think about how some of these issues would have impacted dalit women.

As you have seen above, Dalit women entered from the private to the public domain and started creating spaces for themselves. In the following section, we will learn about Dalit women's critique of the Dalit leadership which was patriarchal in nature. We will analyse this dimension by exploring the three main socio-political movements in the history of Dalit movement in India.

2.5 DALIT PATRIARCHY: CRITIQUE OF DALIT LEADERS

Dalit feminists argued that the dalit women were the active agents of change in the different movements. Dalit women participated in three main political movements in the post independence period. These important movements are the land struggle movement, the panther movement and 'Namantar' (re-naming) movement. Despite the active role played by dalite women, they did not have any sort of recognition due to Dalit leaders' patriarchy. For instance, dalit women were in the vanguard of the above mentioned major dalit movements, but in the public domain these women never been projected as important leaders. The real leadership was always monopolized by dalit males. This systemic marginalization of dalit women has been an evidence of dalit patriarchy. In this section, we will learn about how dalit feminists have developed a critique of Dalit patriarchy.

2.5.1 Land Struggle Movement

The main motto of land struggle movement was that land should be given to those who are landless. This movement is also called as *Bhumihin Satyagrah* movement. It had three phases. The first phase, which began in 1953, was restricted to Marathwada and Ahmadnagar district. During the second phase starting from 1958-59, the movement spread to the whole of Maharashtra as well as to other parts of India. Significantly, the struggles during this phase had its repercussions in New Delhi in 1964-65. Latter on, this movement was spread up in all over India. Dadasaheb Gaikwad was one of the pioneering figure and dalit women such as Sitabai, Gitabai Gaikwad and Shantabai were active in that particular struggle. The Republican Party of India was also active during this period.

2.5.2 Dalit Panther Movement

The Dalit Panther movement in the 1970s was an epochal movement in the history of the Dalits. It represented the fundamental socio-economic anxieties of the Dalits in Maharashtra by questioning the patriarchal state agency. At the same time, it argued for industrial growth in the urban spaces and exposed rural caste chauvinism in Maharashtra. They judged Dalit and non-Dalit leaders/parties for their irresponsible approaches to the atrocities committed on Dalits and the deprivation of Scheduled Caste and Tribes in education by the Central and State Government after 23 years of independence.

2.5.3 Namantar (Re-naming) Movement

The *Namantar* movement was a movement following the Dalit Panthers. The fundamental debate that emerged during this movement was that Marathwada

University should be renamed as Dr. Ambedkar University, because it was the idea of Ambedkar to construct that university. That particular place (Aurangabad)was selected because Marathwada is the most underdeveloped region in the Maharashtra. But there were anti *Namantar* group who denied this proposal due to Marathwada chauvinism. From 1980 to 1988, the *Namantar* movement kept a low profile although processions and demonstrations went on. However, almost all the leading parties in Maharashtra have intervened in this political assertion for the renaming of the university. Dalit feminists contend that dalit women were invisible in these movements due to dalit patriarchy. They also argue that Dalit male leaders suppressed the autonomous emergence of Dalit women in the post-Ambedkarite era by excluding Dalit women from the cultural field of Dalit politics. For instance, the Dalit *Mahila* federation founded in 1942, left an indelible mark in history of women in general and Dalit women in particular. The main aim of the federation was to mobilise Dalit women from different places and conscientize them on different dimensions of harsh dalit realities. It was founded by Ambedkar during the meeting of Scheduled Caste Federation.

2.6 DEBATES ON DALIT WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION AND AUTONOMY

Dalit feminists re-articulate the category of Dalits through their critical reading on caste and gender. They rejected the claims of those upper caste feminist women who work for the cause of Dalit women. They protested against such forms of political patronage. By re-interpreting the perspectives of Phule and Ambedkar they also challenged dalit patriarchy. Their recognition of their oppression structured their identity. It resulted in the formation of the agency and subjectivity of dalit women.

The principal factor of the oppression of dalit women is the institution and ideology of caste that accelerates the patriarchy. For instance, the oppression of the dalit women are carried out through the tangible forms of violence against them. However, the specificity of such violence was not addressed in the mainstream or dominant feminist movement. Dalit feminists recognize this attitude of hegemonic feminist groups which sidelined the links between caste, gender and violence. Dalit feminists also emphasized that patriarchy within their community has to be annihilated in every respect. They also opined that the patriarchy that exists in the dalit community is culturally different from the patriarchy that exists in non-dalit/upper castes. They admit the relationship of dalit patriarchy to the dominant brahminic patriarchal ideology. The specificity of dalit patriarchy, according to dalit feminists, is linked to the oppression of dalits. Therefore, dalit feminists argue that mapping of dalit patriarchy is important to solve their existential

predicaments. Dalit patriarchy only oppressed them in the different spheres of dalit political discourse. However, dalit feminists debunked the facets of dalit patriarchy that subjugate their agency. Dalit feminists successfully exposed the patriarchy within their own families and communities through their autobiographical writings.

It is also important to understand the perceptions of dalit women about their representation. Their understanding of the pitfalls and potentials of their representations are ingrained in their cultural articulations. For instance, autobiographies and literary productions of dalit women elucidate the nuances of their representation, the persistence of the oppression, the contours of brahmanical patriarchy and so on. The development of dalit women's agency acquires fruition in their writings. Eleanor Zelliot (1992) theorized dalit literature as a self conscious movement. Dalit literature is influenced by Russian and Chinese literature. However, the writings of dalit women are unique in their articulations of caste and gender. Baby Kamble is one of the leading dalit women writers of Maharashtra. Her autobiography *Jeena Aamucha* (Our ways of living) explored the relationship between rural areas, religion, superstitions and so on. She narrates the struggle of dalit girl students against practice of untouchability in the schools by uppercaste girls. Thus, she explores the gap that created by caste and gender. She describes how assertive dalit women are treated in patriarchal dalit families. Those women are punished in a barbaric manner. They are also stereotyped as those women who are not confined within the surveillance of the family. Since the 1990s, Dalit women across India have produced autobiographies such as Bama's *Koraku*, and Baby Kamble's autobiography (translated into English as *The Prisons We Broke, Autobiography of a Community*). In recent years, many more autobiographies are getting published and translated into the English language. For those of you who want to know more about such works, you may like to refer to the suggested readings provided at the end of this unit.

Having examined dalit feminism within a historical perspective in some detail above, we will now turn to look at a similar women's movement in the west. The black feminist movement, like the dalit women's movement, arose as a response to, and dissatisfaction with mainstream women's movements. As you read through the next part of this unit, try to look for similarities and differences between these two important feminist movements which were formed contemporaneously in different parts of the world.

2.7 FORMATION OF BLACK FEMINISM

Black feminism has articulated the voice of black women which was never raised by mainstream white women feminists. Black women have argued that race was not part of the analysis of white feminist's movement. Black

feminists claim that the issues of black women were marginalized and kept behind in a larger periphery in the hegemonic discourse of US white women. The black feminists not only postulate their oppression based on gender, race and class but also criticize the black patriarchal structure. They explored the history of the slavery system in term of economic exploitation, production/ income, resources and sexual exploitation of black women.

2.7.1 History of Black Feminism

Black feminism has a history of its own. There is stratification among the black women on the basis of nation, ethnicity, class and so on. Therefore, the history of black women is enriched with their plural experiences. It will be interesting to look at the different forms of activity of black women, as well as the history of black woman activists and their collective assertions. For instance, Sojourner Truth (Isabella Baumfree), born in New York State (1797-1883) was a slave and traveling preacher. She delivered powerful lectures on the abolition of race and on suffrage. She emphasized the plight of black women and also challenged the stereotypes about black women. In one of her pioneering speeches “Ain’t I a Woman?” She argues that she is from a different nation, i.e, “the country of the slave.” This expression shows her understanding of her sidelined existence as a slave and woman. She contends that black women are equal to black men in the context of their rights. However, there is a silence about the rights of black women. She delineated that merely providing rights to black women is not going to challenge black patriarchy. Anna Julia Cooper is one of the renowned black woman activists from the United States (1858-1964). She was a slave who later worked as a teacher and school principal. She was active as an essayist, lecturer and organizer for women’s and civil rights and educational reform. She earned her doctorate at the age of 65. She is known as a social activist-educator and one of the early black feminist theoreticians. She was a founder of the Coloured Women’s League in Washington DC in 1894. She also helped to conduct the National Conference of Colorado Women in 1895. She was one of the founding members of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). She considered this as a living embodiment of women’s activists. Mary McLeod Bethune (1904-42) is one of the outstanding black women activists from United States. She was an educator, civil rights activist and organizer of Daughters of Slaves. She was the founder and President of Bethune-Cookman college (1904-42). She is the founder of National Council of Negro Women. She is the first women who managed a federal agency, the Division of Negro Affairs and focused on conditions of domestic service, child welfare, education, lynching, the public press and suffrage. She considers these aspects as some of the core dimensions of the lives of blacks. However, black feminists such as Mary Ann Weathers provided radical perspectives related to the liberation of black women. She was part

of civil rights movement of the 1960s and later joined in the Black feminist movement. She argues that black assertions suffer from patriarchy. She raises the questions such as if black men themselves are not liberated how can they liberate black women. She pointed out the internal patriarchy among the black community. She criticized the black women who operate within the non-black, dominant feminist circles. She considers black women as the most oppressed and degraded minority in the world. Therefore, she argues that black women have to claim for their place. She also urged black women to forge affinities irrespective of their stratification on the basis of class, education and poverty. At the same time, she advocated solidarity with non-black, poor women. She cautioned about the impact of conflict generating racist ideology on blacks as well as whites.

South African women protested against pass laws in 1913. The “Giriama resistance” plays a vital role in the history of black women. The Giriama are a group of people who belong to the place called Kilifi of the east African coastal region. Makatlili started the Girima resistance during the oath swearing campaign among women and men at Koya at 1913. Pare women protested against the colonial taxation. They are the ethnic group who belong to Pare mountains of northern Tanzania. They marched to Tanganvikan district head quarters in 1913. It was a resistance against the taxation of their husbands and sons. They argued that their husbands should be allowed to home from migrant wage labour. Kikiyu women were against the colonial labour policies in Kenya. They produced insulting songs against the colonial labour policies. Kom women were part of nationalistic politics in British cameroons during 1958. Some black women were arrested during the Mau Mau revolt during the period of 1952-1960. Some among them also worked as groups medicine, food and weapons to forest fighters. Several among them went to forest to take care of those children and men who were part of the revolt. Others took arms and joined in the revolt. Black women founded organizations such as Lagos Market womens association (1920s), Nigerian Women’s Party and Abeokuta Women’s Union(1940s). These organizations focused on resistance against colonial taxation,organized market’s women and women’s welfare. Bibi Titi Mohammed, the leader of the women’s musical group Dar es Salaam mobilized women and beer brewers under the Tanganyikan nationalist movement.

Van Allen argues that black women had common economic anxieties during the pre-colonial period and it resulted in their political agency. Black women participated in the major activities of NACCP during 1909 to 1945. Black female teachers were present in the New Orleans branch. Abolitionist leaders such as Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Tubman, Frances Ellen, Watkins Harper talked about race and gender. Angela Davis and Kathleen Cleaver were active in the Black Panthers Movement in the 1960s.

According to Carol Moselay Braun, the civil rights activism was one track and the electoral process was the other. She was the first black women to serve in the US senate. A hybrid identity based on the intersection of black and woman formed through the advent of black women into the political arena.

2.7.2 Understanding the Solidarity and Critique of Black Feminist Discourse

Black feminism is not a stream in the wilderness among feminism. It has a genealogy of its own. It challenges the foundations of grand feminisms in a productive fashion. This unit explores the committal-pluralistic strands within the black feminism.

Oyeronke Oyewumi in her path breaking paper “Visualizing the body ; western theories and African subjects,” maps the dynamics of “sisterarchy” and its other. She argues that feminist scholars deploy cross cultural data to study different sections of women without considering their differences. She explores feminist erasures in terms such as Eurocentric as well as racist. Thus, she locates the social space of gendered-African subjects.

Patricia Hill Collins (1980, 1990) introduced the category ‘outsider within’ her group as well as her identity as a woman belonging to that community (1990, p.xi). She argues that African American women have a “self defined standpoint on their oppression.” However, Collins foregrounds that the relationship between black women’s standpoint and black feminist thought is dialectical in nature. The everyday knowledge forms of the women are articulated by experts among those women. Such articulations provide Black woman a different consciousness to differentiate themselves from hegemonic social order. Thus Black feminist thought articulates the already existing forms of knowledge of black women and provide new tools to challenge the hegemony. Collins also traces the Black women’s genealogy of ideas through practices and theories of organic Black woman intellectuals such as Anna.J.Cooper, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Ida.B.Wells, Mary Church Terrel and others. An Afrocentric feminist sensibility emerges through her oppositional-intellectual culture. Collins differs from value-neutral(white) feminists. She deconstructs Dorothy.E.Smith’s notion of ‘everyday’ as the individual condition of white-middle class woman. On the other hand, the notion of everyday becomes ‘collective cum individual’ in the life worlds of Black women.

Patricia Hill Collins (1980, 1990) is one of the most well-known contemporary black feminist theorists who has explored the nature of the category of black feminist. She raised the questions such as who can be a black feminist. She argues that black feminist thought is abound with plural and contradictory meanings. According to her, black women distribute experiences

to enrich black feminist consciousness. She shows the connections between the lives of black women and their knowledge production. Black feminist thought, according to her, is the specialized knowledge produced by Afro-American women which foregrounds the stand point for black women. Their survival is determined by the knowledge of the dynamics of race, gender and class subordination. Their wisdom lies in assessing that knowledge. It is more related to community than the individual. She theorises the location of black female African-American as the “outsider-within.” The category of outsider-within shows the experience of being a part of the community and the simultaneous exclusion from it. She also dismisses the positivist epistemology as eurocentric, masculinist in nature. She emphasizes the afrocentric world view that is unique and opposite of the Eurocentric world view since the afrocentric point of view is collective and opposed to individual interests.

Now that we have examined some of the ideas of the main African-American feminists, let us look more closely at some current debates within the black feminist movement.

2.8 CURRENT DEBATES IN BLACK FEMINISM

Some of the debates that engage with the question of race and sexuality provide a different reading to the discourse of sexuality. In this regard, it is important to understand the contributions of the black feminist thinker Audre Lorde (1934-1992) on the question of sexuality, race and black feminist politics. An American writer who described herself as a “Black Lesbian Feminist Warrior Poet,” she was a poet, activist and founder of Kitchen Table; Women of Color Press. She argues that mainstream feminist movement ignores the question of race, sexual preference, class and age. Thus, their category of sisterhood is pretentious in the case of its homogeneity of experience. She also argues that there is bias in the mainstream curriculum related to colored women’s writings. Those writings are treated as the other. She considers the racial otherness of black women as a visible reality. She asserts that white women find it difficult to read black women’s writings because they find it difficult to acknowledge black women as women. They cannot admit their differences from white women.

However, Audre Lorde considers female circumcision among black women to be a crime against black women. She does not romanticize it as part of communitarian politics. Some of her perspectives on sexuality challenge the homophobia of the black community. She argues that black women are not a great vat of homogenized chocolate milk. There are different faces or pluralities among them and those differences are the part of their existence. She considers heterosexism and homophobia as obstacles to the mobilization of black women. She argues that heterosexism is simply one form of love.

Homophobia, according to her, is a terror that is centred on the love for/ among the same sex. It results in hate. She challenges the retrogressive position of the black community against black lesbianism. They consider the lesbian as a threat. According to Audre Lorde, the institution of the black family is withered due to broken families, children out of wedlock and so on. She gives the perceptions of black feminists on the family. Thus, she argues that black lesbians do not deviate from their community. They also believe in the family. Audre Lorde argues that European history provides a conditioned understanding of human difference on the basis of simplified binary opposites. The subjects of systematic oppression such as black, third world people, working class, older people, women and so on occupy the field of the 'dehumanized inferior' (1984). Lorde contends that the oppressed should teach the oppressor her mistakes. Lorde expands the conceptual terrain of the notion 'oppressed' to sections such as afro American children, black and third world people, women, gays, and lesbians. Lorde deconstructs the dominant feminist categories such as sisterhood which erases the intersections of race, sexual preference, class and age. Lorde also emphasizes the determinations of class and economic differences. She also explores internal patriarchy through the atrocities that happen against black women. At the same time, Lorde engages within the differences of black women in a meaningful manner. Based on the above, we can say that Audre Lorde founded the premises of black lesbian sisterhood.

The Intersectionalist approach is a prominent discourse in critical race theory. It engages with race and gender. Kimberle Crenshaw is one of the founders of critical race theory. She is an African American critical race theorist who teaches law at the University of California, Los Angeles. According to her, the category of intersectionality denotes the multiple levels of interaction related to race and gender. It investigates how race and gender intersect in constructing the political, structural and representation dimensions of violence against women of colour. This category also challenges the project of identity politics that homogenizes identities; it focuses on competing identities. Women of colour are theorized as the product of intersections of race and gender. It also deals with the nuances of the marginalization of black women.

2.9 LET US SUM UP

You have seen in this unit how the historical struggles of the Dalit and Black feminists emerged as responses to mainstream Indian feminism in India, and to mainstream white feminism in the American women's movement respectively. The unit discussed how some current debates mark a shift from the aforementioned perspectives on black women and provided a rationale to understand the nature of black feminist intellectual streams.

It focused on the aspect of identity tensions, which exist between the two streams of thought, i.e., black feminism vis-à-vis dalit feminism. We also looked at how these movements reflect the intersection of gender with other inequalities like race and caste.

2.10 GLOSSARY

Afro-American Studies : This term refers to residents of United States who have origins in any black populations of Africa. It is argued that Afro-American studies derives its critical acumen from Black aesthetics and Black sociology. It also challenges western European ideologies. It is an intellectual discourse that explores the multiple subjectivities of the Afro-American communities.

Dalit : This category derives from the Marathi word 'dalit' which means 'broken up'. It became popular by dalit organic intellectual B.R.Ambedkar during the colonial period in India. This category acquired broader definition by radical dalit movement called Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra. It signifies the politicized identity or subject that is endowed with self dignity.

Ethnocentrism : This term is first introduced by W.G.Sumner in 1906. It refers to the biased attitude that exists between in-groups and out-groups. It shows the privilege of certain customs and behaviour in society. It is also deployed to refer to show the regional biases of social scientists that is evident in their works.

Intersectionalist approach: This feminist approach is initiated by Kimberley Crenshaw, one of the founders of critical race theory Crenshaw. It explores the diverse levels of interactions related to race and gender. It also examines the nature of the political and social dimensions of the gendered violence against black women.

Race : This category is used in social sciences to explore the social construction of social groups. It is deployed to explore shared, historical,

ethnic roots of certain communities. The problem with race studies is that sometimes it becomes ethnocentric, especially when race becomes an object of inquiry in the control of dominant/hegemonic communities. Thus, it may end up reproducing the stereotypes based on superior and subordinate race categories.

2.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss the historical background of dalit feminism in India.
- 2) Analyse the dalit feminist critique of dalit patriarchy. Use examples of some of the ideas of the three main dalit leaders to formulate your response.
- 3) How do you understand the formation of the black feminist movement within a historical perspective? Explain.
- 4) Based on your understanding of the ideas of two major theorists of the black feminist movement, outline some of the commonalities, differences and debates within these.
- 5) Do you think there is identity tension among the dalit and black feminists in the contemporary period? Explain in your own words with the help of examples.

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UNIT 3 ECOFEMINISM

Anandita Majumdar

Structure

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Objectives
- 3.3 Defining Ecofeminism
- 3.4 Theoretical Debates
 - 3.4.1 Nature-Culture: The Seeds of Ecofeminism in the West
 - 3.4.2 Prakriti and Shakti: Towards a More Indigenous Approach in Ecofeminism
- 3.5 Alternative Ideas
- 3.6 Environmental Activism: Chipko and Beyond
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Unit End Questions
- 3.9 References
- 3.10 Suggested Readings

3.1 INTRODUCTION

You may have heard of the term ‘ecofeminism’ already. In this unit, we will try to achieve a greater understanding of the term within different contexts. We will examine the definition of ecofeminism, and then look at some related theoretical debates. We will look at both western and indigenous approaches to ecofeminism. With the help of this theoretical framework, we will try to gain a critical perspective on some of the ways in which the subjugation of the environment is linked to that of women. You will also learn about the role of different women’s movements and their struggle to preserve the dignity of our environment.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit you will be able to:

- Critically analyse the notion of ecofeminism as theory and as a practical solution while approaching problems regarding gender and the environment;
- Describe the subjugation and oppression of environment and women by a larger system or culture; and
- Explain how different cultures come to see the environment and the conflicts in these multiple perceptions.

3.3 DEFINING ECOFEMINISM

Before we begin to examine various aspects related to ecofeminism, let us first attempt to define it. It is important to understand that ecofeminism as a theory is a combination of ideas that support the fight for women's empowerment and that of a viable, sustainable environment. Braidotti (1994) defines ecofeminism as 'the feminist position most explicitly concerned with environmental degradation'. Thus in the most simple terms, ecofeminism comes to regard an association between women and nature as essential to the way both are treated. For both women and nature are mistreated and subjugated—and as Francoise d'Eaubonne, the French feminist credited with the emergence of the idea of ecofeminism, comes to note—this is because of the 'Male System'. She suggests that the only way to save the environment is through the destruction of male power by women. Yet, ecofeminism is much more than a mere disapproval and destruction of the male power. It is very much embedded in the way women are closely associated with the environment in the multiple ways in which they are perceived. And within feminism too there is no one way of looking at this relation, for as a theory ecofeminism is linked to diverse thoughts and practices.

3.4 THEORETICAL DEBATES

As a movement, ecofeminism has come to be influenced in different ways by different strands of the feminist movement. Thus, Jaggar notes that liberal feminism is least able to associate itself with ecology for its orientation remains centered on white, middle class concerns. And even though radical feminism uses the association between women and nature as a rallying point in its emancipator politics, their argument is seen as far too simplistic too carry forward a movement. However, Social Ecofeminism comes across as an interesting new movement that is influenced by Marxism and is based on the recognition that gender is socially constructed and recognizes the urgent need to develop conceptual tools that will look at ecological and social change vis-à-vis gender.

Bina Agarwal (2007) lays out certain key ideas within ecofeminism. First, there is an important connection between the domination and exploitation of nature. Second, in patriarchal thought women are seen to be closer to nature—and men as closer to culture. Nature in turn is seen to be inferior to culture, and therefore women are inferior to men. Third, the domination and oppression of nature and of women have occurred together. Women have an important stake in ending the domination of nature, thereby bringing together both human and non-human nature. Fourth, the feminist movement and the environment movement must stand together to create a more equitable and just society. Both the movements have a lot in common and

are can create a common perspective, praxis and theory. In this sense, Agarwal notes that the eco-feminist movement has an ideological base that attributes the source of the subordination and domination of women in existing systems of beliefs and practices, and representations. And the supporters of this movement are calling out to all men and women to rethink and recreate their relationship to nature. Ecofeminism emerged as a response to the large-scale destruction of the environment and the subsequent impact on women. Interestingly, the correlation between a tortured and exploited environment and a subjugated and oppressed sex was evolved in the West. But in order to create a workable theory of action the need to look at cross-cultural debates and issues led to the emergence of other strands of thought within ecofeminism. This was also in answer to large-scale ecological movements in developing countries where the ties between nature and women were seen to be of more relevance.

In the next section, we trace the links theoretical influences of the eco-feminist movement, with reference to the West—and later look at the other cultural understanding of the movement. In the latter case, the focus is especially on India as over the past two decades it has spawned many ecological movements lead primarily by women.

3.4.1 Nature-Culture: The Seeds of Ecofeminism in the West

Sherry Ortner's (1972) formulation linking nature to women and culture to men remains the definitive ideological influence of the ecofeminist movement. The nature-culture approach looks at the close relation that women share with nature and the resultant insubordination of both nature and women.

In trying to understand the reasons behind the insubordination of women in society, Ortner identifies three levels of the problem. The first level refers to the universal fact of the inferior position of women in society, which is however socially and culturally endorsed. Ortner wishes to examine the reasons behind it. Second, are the cultural symbolisms, ideologies and social structural arrangements that are related to women but differ from one culture to another. Third, what are the means by which women revolt or try to suppress these structures of oppression and insubordination. Ortner is categorical that in examining the inferior position of women she is looking at universals, or facts applicable across cultures that place women in a disadvantageous position.

Yet, before one begins to associate women with nature and men with culture it is important to understand that the categories of nature and culture themselves and are cultural categories—social constructions. According to Ortner, culture therefore implicitly recognizes and asserts the difference

between nature and natural phenomena, and itself. Here the focus is on the difference in the operation of nature and the operation of culture—and a situation wherein culture sees itself as capable of controlling the operation of nature and nature itself. Thus, Ortner says, “This culture (i.e. every culture) at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from, but superior in power to, nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform—to ‘socialize’ and ‘culturalize’ nature” (1972, p.11).

Having established the universal domination of nature by culture, Ortner creates the foundation of her examination of how women come to be identified with or symbolically seen to be closer to nature, as opposed to men, who are associated with culture. Women are placed within the format of nature primarily because of their physiological, bodily make-up. Her body and its functions are thought to condition her social roles and psychic (emotional, mental) structure in such a way that removes her from cultural functions, by putting constraints on her.

Ortner draws from her understanding of **Simone de Beauvoir’s** *Second Sex* to look at how women are perceived to be physiologically closer to nature and therefore inferior. For Beauvoir the role that women play in society is an extension of the physiological state. The physical make-up, development and functions of the human female are “.....to a great extent than the male, a prey of the species” (1972, p.14). That is many major organs and processes within the female body are actually geared towards the reproduction of the human species rather than the personal needs of the woman herself. Take the example of the female breasts, which according to Beauvoir serve absolutely no purpose to a woman’s personal health and can be done away with. Similarly menstruation and the ovarian cycles are geared towards creating conducive conditions for bearing children. For Beauvoir, it is almost as though the woman has to adapt to the needs of the egg, rather to her own requirements. Most of the above processes are a source of discomfort and may often in many cultures be the reason for segregation and isolation, as is the case with menstruation.

The above reasoning for women’s inferior role leads to a larger point that Ortner wishes to make. Though descriptive, the above analysis points to how in reproducing the human species, women are handicapped, while men in being excluded—directly—from the task of reproduction are at an advantageous position. Men create more than life—they create ‘meaning’. By meaning Ortner and Beauvoir are referring to things that exist beyond the level of mere existence and the survival of the species. For men are able to create inventions of novelty and value meant for the future—while women by virtue of their physiognomy are ‘doomed’ to repeat and recreate the human race. In creating technology and symbols, man is involved in the

production of things and values that are eternal and everlasting, whereas women are creating only perishables or human beings.

Interestingly, in such a formulation men are seen to be associated with culture through the invention and participation in hunting and warfare. Acts that do not create—but destroy. Women are nature in that sense that they create what man destroys. Yet on the other hand women are very much part of the cultural enterprise. They are part of the socialization process that trains the young to join society. Though socialization as part of childrearing is an extension of childbearing (which in turn restricts her to the household and the domestic domain), yet it is a role that mediates between nature and culture. In this sense women come to be seen as *intermediaries*.

This intermediate status of women is read as the middle position in a hierarchy where culture is at the top and nature down below. Ortner sees that the role of being intermediaries may stem from *mediating* between nature and culture. Women remain close to nature, but also important participants in the social and cultural process through their role in socialization. Though relegated to the domestic milieu of childbearing and childrearing their importance as primary agents in the transmission of cultural values to the younger generation (boys' socialization is taken over by men once they reach puberty, while that of girls' continue with their mother) cannot be wished away. However this mediation with culture can be relegated to a lesser domain. So, Ortner notes that the participation of women in the domestic domain is seen as a form of lesser culture, in opposition to the higher culture that men belong to and cultivate, such as religion, law, arts, etc.

Take for instance cooking - Ortner notes that cooking as an act within the domestic domain is a job for women, primarily because of their natural association with the household. However, cuisine or cooking as an art remains the domain of men and therefore superior to and separate from everyday cooking. For Ortner, the universal devaluation of women comes from the separation of nature and culture—and within culture the difference between low and high culture. Either way, whether in their association with nature or with low culture, women remain inferior and subordinated. In all this, tellingly, women accept their subordinate role as intermediaries and reproducers of the natural order, just as nature accepts the domination of man and culture.

The above theoretical background forms the foundation of the Western ecofeminist movement. **Bina Agarwal** notes that the biological essentialism inherent within this formulation (for which Ortner too has been extensively criticized) does not take into account the way women are viewed in different

cultures. It places woman as a unitary category (2007, p.319) ignoring cultural, class and ethnic differences. Second, with such an ideological framework the ecofeminist movement depends on a logic of subordination that ignores the ways in which domination is exercised—beyond the realms of ideology and at the level of economics, politics, etc. Third, the above approach does not look at the ways in which ideological constructs come about—both historically and culturally, and how they become predominant within society. That is, what institutions, social and economic relations make such ideas of subordination dominant. Finally, the association of women with nature does not take into account women's everyday association with nature. It pushes forth a kind of 'essentialism' that looks at female essence as static and unchanging. Agarwal finds such a stance deeply problematic as notions regarding nature, culture and gender have already been seen to be socially and historically constructed.

However proponents of this theory find support in ecofeminists such as **Ariel Salleh** who places women's reproductive functions within the domain of nature. She attempts to move forward by placing ecofeminism within a mode of praxis or movement.

Salleh (1993) is very clear about the importance of a discourse that places women and nature as similarly represented, if not treated, especially symbolically. She endorses the linking together of the feminist and environmental movements to put forth an alternative world view. This is tellingly evident in her critique of another strand of environmental theory, called Deep Ecology, that Salleh sees as representing the requirements of white, middle class men who see nature as a means of reconnecting with the human 'ego' and is removed from any activist concerns regarding the environment. Salleh wishes to stress on a theory that can also form the basis of an active movement wherein excluded and oppressed groups within society such as women are members and frontrunners.

In her attempts to create a theory that is tied to a praxis rooted in life needs and the survival of the habitat, Salleh recommends looking at the hands-on experiences of those women who are closest to their habitats, such as Third-World women. Ecofeminism according to her should be a strategy for social action that includes both men and women. In fact in answer to critics, such as the deep ecologists, who maintain that women are as much responsible for the destruction of the environment in their dependence upon labour-saving devices and technology—Salleh notes that women continue to be relegated to their 'natural' role as housekeepers even with the advent of such technology. She is categorical in noting that this view emerges from a biased, Western standpoint that does not take into account the lack of any such labour-saving technology at the disposal of poor Third-World women, who live and work with their own labour, close

to nature. She also insists that the acknowledgement of the feminine role as 'carers' and backbones of families is an important aspect of the ecofeminist movement.

Vandana Shiva finds the Western ecofeminist movement as lacking in the way it presents the association between women and nature. Her formulation of a more inclusive and dynamic theory, draws on Indian cosmological and philosophical thinking to project a new relationship between gender and nature. Having examined the movement within the western context, let us now turn to India to examine indigenous approaches to ecofeminism.

3.4.2 Prakriti and Shakti: Towards A More Indigenous Approach In Ecofeminism

In ancient Indian philosophy the association of women with nature is even more deeply embedded than in Western thought. However, unlike in the West, the opposition between the male and the female, and in turn between nature and culture, does not exist in Indian philosophical thought. **Vandana Shiva** (1988) finds this to be the hallmark of a culture that looks at both the male and female as the expression of the same person—and not separate from each other.

In Indian cosmology the world is produced through the opposing play of destruction and creation, and cohesion and disintegration (Shiva, 1988). The dynamic force that comes out of this process is called *Shakti*—which is literally the source of everything and in turn pervades everything. And the manifestation of *Shakti*, or the feminine principle in the form of an energy or power is called *Prakriti*, or nature. "Nature, both animate and inanimate, is thus an expression of *Shakti*, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos, in conjunction with the masculine principle (*Purusha*), *Prakriti* creates the world" (Shiva, 1988, p.38). Thus here person and nature or *Purusha-Prakriti* are a duality in unity. They are not opposing to each other, but rather they are "...inseparable complements of one another in nature, in woman, in man" (Shiva, 1988, p.40).

Shiva notes that the association of women exclusively with nature is not a revolutionary thought but is actually the source of the subjugation and exploitation of women and nature. She finds Beauvoir's formulation to be characteristic of Western feminist thought that accepts the duality and opposition of the male and female—further placing the woman as weak and therefore oppressed. In fact the answer to the woman problem, for Beauvoir, lies in masculinizing women. Liberation will come through in a world where women are free to assume masculine values. For Shiva such a formulation is problematic especially when the categories of masculine and feminine are themselves socially constructed. Western gender theory has placed them within biological essentialism. However Shiva supports another line of

thinking that looks at a transgender ideology wherein the feminine principle is seen in both men and women. This feminine principle is the principle of activity and creativity in nature, “One cannot really distinguish the masculine from the feminine, person from nature, *Purusha* from *Prakriti*” (Shiva, 1988, p.52). Nowhere else is this more evident than in ancient philosophies, especially those found in the Third World where, “Women and nature are associated *not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life*” (*author’s emphasis*, 1988, p.47).

Despite there being a unified approach towards nature in terms of men and women, Shiva reiterates that women do share a special relationship with nature. This is seen in the following ways. First, in the ways in which women’s interaction with nature was reciprocal—for they found themselves to be close to nature in the way both produced and replenished the earth and society. Second, women are in partnership with nature by not only using its resources, but also giving it back. They do not own nature like property, but insist on participating in the process of ‘to let grow and to make grow’. Last, with nature women are producers who help sustain society and relations. There are proponents of a subsistence economy and the inventors of the first productive economy (Shiva, 1988, p. 43).

In such a situation any kind of division and oppression of nature and of women is a result of colonialism. Shiva finds colonialism to be a source of the destruction of nature and of women’s work. The coming in of science and technology has broken the synthesis between nature, masculine and feminine principles—and this has been replaced by an unequal and hierarchical relationship. Development is seen as maldevelopment for women and nature by perpetuating domination and centralization through patriarchal control.

Take for instance the colonial destruction of forests in India. Shiva notes that the forest in India is a symbol of life and fertility. Known as Aranyani or the Goddess of the Forest, she is worshipped in different regions by different names. The forest has always been the highest expression of harmony and communal habitat—honoured and protected as sacred groves. This is symbolic of the community’s sense of deep ecological understanding. Colonial rule was established with the destruction of the natural resources of India, such as forests. The colonial practice of commercial forestry and the scientific management of forests, involving the marking out of forest area as ‘reserved’ and protected, was the beginning of the displacement of traditional indigenous knowledge and women’s subsistence economy. The above practice involved the erosion of forests and the rights of the local people on its produce.

Shiva insists that the role of marginalized women and communities becomes especially important for they are living proof of the harmful effects of

progress, as also they have the holistic and ecological knowledge of what the protection and production of life involves. Women of the Third World are the best representatives of such a category.

Bina Agarwal finds Shiva's theory different from the Western feminist perspective in the sense that it explores aspects that the latter have left out in their formulation, especially the links between development and developmental change and their impact on the environment, as well as the aspect of people's dependence on the environment for their livelihood.

Yet, the theory is not without some drawbacks. One, Shiva's theory places all Third-World women under one category. This kind of generalization that collapses cultural, economic and social differences is also a kind of essentialism, according to Agarwal. It sees all Third-World women as close to nature, especially in terms of their knowledge base and dependence.

Two, within India itself the theory does not take into account other historical, cultural and social processes and ideas that may have impacted the relationship with nature. The dependence on Hindu philosophical thought does not apply to other systems of thought and practices in India. Besides within Hinduism itself there are very many different strands of understanding that may not support what Shiva lays out in her theory.

Three, Agarwal contends that Shiva does not include the impact of pre-colonial structures and practices upon the environment and on women. Inequality in the form of caste, and class have long existed within the Indian social framework, which Shiva ignores, giving precedence to colonial oppression and the coming in of modern scientific thought as the primary reasons for the destruction of the environment and the suppression of women. The above criticisms point to the fact that within ecofeminism there is still space for change and reformulation. As Salleh notes, the movement's dynamism lies in its theoretical stance that adapts to changes occurring across the world as well as giving due importance to alternative theories that combine a more holistic approach to environment and gender issues.

In the following section, you will learn about some alternative approaches to ecofeminism which will help you to think critically about ways in which these debates may be resolved.

3.5 ALTERNATIVE IDEAS

The need of the hour remains the formulation of a theory that is an inspiration for a movement uniting the fight for the protection of the environment, and women's rights. Such a theory should also unite rather than alienate women and men across the world. ecofeminism has tried to

do so in many ways, but of late the need to encapsulate aspects that point to the diversity in women and their ties to the environment has led to the formulation of alternative theories that aim to be more inclusive.

Bina Agarwal formulates the idea of *feminist environmentalism* wherein the link between women and environment is seen through the dynamics of gender, class, caste and race, and through the organization of production, reproduction and distribution. In terms of being a theory for action, “such a perspective would call for struggles over both resources and meanings” (Agarwal, 2007, p.324).

This approach involves the inclusion of ideas such as the appropriation of resources by dominant groups in society through control over property, and power. The ways in which this control is exercised, both ideological and institutional, is a sign of privilege and therefore needs to be examined further.

In terms of feminist ideology, Agarwal talks of notions regarding gender and the actual division of work especially in relation to the environment. On the environmental front there is a need to look at the relationship between people and nature in terms of exploitation and appropriation by a few.

Agarwal goes on to discuss the importance of feminist environmentalism in relation to the Indian experience. Here she analyses the different reasons behind the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the environment. Needless to say the dynamics behind this oppression goes beyond the simplistic understanding of nature as similar to women—and therefore subject to similar treatment by those in power. It includes issues such as class and caste control and other social, economic and political problems.

Forms of environmental degradation such as water and wind erosion, falling surface or ground water, indiscriminate sinking of tubewells, amongst many others are connected to exploitation at various levels of power and governance. The *process of statization* or the state’s increasing control over forest commons has been noted since colonial rule. This has led to large scale degradation and deforestation. Post-independence the government has actively pursued the policy of alienating the people from their rights in common forest land. Locals do not have access to forests from which they drew their sustenance and livelihood. The process of privatization of common resources has meant that forests are now being increasingly commercially exploited. The erosion of community resource management systems; exclusion of local people, especially women from control over these resources; excessive population growth, and its pressures on natural resources; and the negative impact of technology such as that used in the Green Revolution have only made the environmental issue more serious.

These processes are happening at the macro level wherein the state is becoming oblivious of how its policies are impacting the micro-local populace—especially women and children. Agarwal lays out certain aspects of how this process of statization, increasing technology and privatization is affecting the marginalized population of women and children. First, the preexisting division of labour based on gender places women in poor peasant and tribal households as the chief source of sustenance. They are hugely dependent upon the environment, taking fuel from firewood found in the forest—environmental degradation and the state control of forest land is pushing women and young girls to travel further for fuel or firewood. The stress on getting food and basic necessities that were earlier available close to hand, is creating an unequal division of labour where women have to labour harder. Second, the systematic differences in allocation of resources in terms of gender—is evident in the huge mortality and morbidity rates amongst women and children, especially girls. Third, inequalities in men's and women's resources also include a disadvantaged position in the labour market. Fluctuations in weather patterns mean more uncertainty in agricultural work—leading to availability of primarily seasonal work. It is these reasons amongst others that create the need for a movement that looks at the processes by which the degradation of the environment is often connected to the marginalization of communities and groups such as women.

3.6 ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM: CHIPKO AND BEYOND

Interestingly, the cause that ecofeminism wishes to fight for around the world has been women-led environmental activism. In India as way back as the 1970s a wave of environmental movements spread thanks to the dedicated involvement of women fighting to safeguard their environment and resources. The most famous of these was the *Chipko* movement that gathered steam in the hills of India affecting village after village.

Radha Kumar (1993) lays out a dateline of the movement to show how much the involvement of women affected the way the government framed its policies around environmental policy. The movement began in 1973 in Gopeshwar in Chamoli District in northern India. It began with the women of the village hugging (*chipko* in Hindi) the ash trees of the nearby forest that a sports goods contractor from Allahabad had come to cut. This was followed by one of the movement founders, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, influencing the villagers of Reni, to take action against the auctioning off of the forest neighbouring the village. The men of the village decided to approach the government, even after which the indiscriminate cutting of trees began. Seeing this the women led by a 60 year old widow Gaura Devi went ahead and hugged the trees, foiling the attempts of the contractors to cut them.

Again in June 1975 women stopped the felling of trees in a forest near Gopeshwar village by clinging to them. The *Chipko* movement spread in many areas of Uttaranchal—especially in the districts of Chamoli and Terhi-Garhwal.

The movement began to organize itself and called itself the *Dasauli Gram Swarajya Mandal* that helped form women's organizations such as the *Mahila Mangal Dals*. This helped women in becoming a part of the way in which they could claim their rights to decide what was done to the forests and fields. The characteristic of the environmental movement is seen especially in terms of how it has been led by women at the local level, with the men often not supporting their activism. In most cases the movement has involved a face-off between the male-dominated village panchayats and the *Mahila Mangal Dals* (women's groups). The struggle for the protection of the environment has often taken on an anti-men stance. Conflict over grazing and rights over resources has been reflected in the way men have tried to coerce women into toeing their line—through threats and beatings. Often in support of the contractors the men and the panchayats have tried to dissuade environmental activists from fighting for their cause. Interestingly, as Kumar notes, the *Chipko* movement takes on different issues for the purposes of activism. Anti-mining, timber contracting and anti-alcohol movements trace their original source to the movement for environmental rights. The anti-alcohol movement for instance is in response to the ill-effects of alcohol addiction in rural areas. Not only does the addiction lead to violence against women, it also impacts the men's health and most importantly leads to a squandering of household income. This affects women directly—especially in rural and tribal areas. In the latter, many tribes have willed forest land to contractors under the influence of local, country-made liquor. The movement for prohibition therefore is seen to be necessary to protect both the environment and women.

Uttarakhand Sangharsh Vahini was formed in 1977 in support of prohibition. In 1983, in a mass meeting held by the organization alcoholism was seen to be a major problem. From 1965-71, anti-alcohol activism gained momentum leading to prohibition in many areas. In February 1984, villagers in a district in Almora successfully managed to bring to book an agent in illicit liquor, as well as the government official who was involved in smuggling the liquor. The movement then spread to different villages where the Vahini activists went about destroying liquor, liquor shops—and made liquor vendors apologize in public.

In order to analyse the impact of the environmental movement in India, three examples are presented here. Each of the three movements are over the span of at least three decades—and show the struggle that women have to undertake to fight for their rights and those of the environment.

Interestingly, the rights of women and the environment seem to compliment each other in each of the instances discussed here. The examples are all from India.

Madhu Sarin (2001) looks at the politics of the forest and the role of women in environmental activism in the Kumaon-Garhwal region. In Uttarakhand, even though women have been closest to the environment in terms of livelihood and cultivation, yet the forests have been under the control of the men. Under colonial rule, the British rulers took over most of the forest land and made it inaccessible to the local population under this elaborate system of scientific management of forests that placed them under the category of reserved areas. Denotified or preserved forest land was an attempt by the government to have access to areas rich in natural resources. Post-independence, the government introduced the notion of *Van Panchayats* which would be involved in joint forest management (JFM). The idea of JFM came about through the *Chipko* struggle that fought for involvement of the local population with their natural resources. However, the panchayats in this area had been traditionally male-dominated while the movement had been overwhelmingly led by women. Therefore, the unofficial, informal community forest management (CFM) was formed by women in favour of their role in safeguarding natural resources and the forests in the area. The CFMs in the area where opposed to the male-dominated *Van Panchayats* and the government-controlled JFMs. The first point of conflict began with the formation of village forest joint management (VFJMs) which were funded by the World Bank in association with the Uttaranchal Government. The till now autonomous *Van Panchayats* came under the control of the VFJMs. This was because women had begun to take over the reins of the *Van Panchayats*, and with the help of government programmes such as *Mahila Samakhya*, which aims to empower women, they were doing an outstanding job of protecting the forests and safeguard the community's resources. The VFJMs represented opposition from the village men and the forest department.

In Khirakot, a village in the Someshwar valley in Uttaranchal, the women found their access to the forest blocked by a miner who was building a soapstone mine in the area. When the mine dust began to settle on their land making it difficult for them to plant their crops and plough the field, the women launched a protest against the miner. In retaliation the miner filed criminal cases against the village men, each of those who had protested against the setting up of the mine. The women in turn were not intimidated (even though the men were) and collected money from each village household to fight the case. The contractor further tried intimidation in the form of destruction of property, and stoning of the villagers' houses. The activists in return blocked the route to the quarry and did not let labourers to work in the mine. Finally, on a visit to the area the district magistrate was moved

by the struggle of the village women and immediately recommended cancelling the case. This was further followed by the closing of the mine in 1982—a true victory for the women’s movement (Kumar, 1993).

Another very significant instance of women’s involvement in the fight against human and environmental injustice is the infamous Bhopal gas tragedy, with which you would be already familiar, as it has been under media glare for several years since it occurred in 1984.

Box 3.1: Case Analysis of the Bhopal Gas

The Bhopal gas tragedy of 1984 saw a mass movement of women gas victims in response to the indiscriminate and avoidable death of around 4000 people to gas poisoning from the Union Carbide factory. The tragedy that recorded 500,000 as potential victims—in terms of long-term signs of gas pollution—was a result of gross negligence. After the Government of India decided to take sole control of the disaster in terms of relief, and pursuing the case against the American firm for compensation to the victims—a lot of information was closeted under the Officials Secrets Act. To unearth the information and fight for adequate medical care, the women of Bhopal came out in large numbers.

Women’s’ continuous protest against the Bhopal gas disaster is exemplifying the aspect of existence of ecofeminism in the contemporary context of nature/culture debate. Over the years the ratio of women to men in protests and demonstrations increased to 90:10. The women went on fighting for relief and employment even after the government settled for much less with Union Carbide in 1989. Finally with the election of a new government, the activists were able to win Rs. 360 lakh as a three-year relief grant, as well as government access to medical information. Most importantly they secured the government’s support to reopen the case against Carbide that had been infamously settled in 1989 by the Supreme Court (Kumar, 1993). It is these stories of courage and activism that have inspired feminists and environmental activists around the world. And it is these very movements that inspire ecofeminists to fight for the rights of women and the environment.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit looks at the importance of an ideology that aims to bring together the shared causes of women and the environment. In particular, the unit focuses on the following aspects of the eco-feminist movement:

- Showing how women are intrinsically linked to the environment and nature, through their physical make-up and the social roles that they fulfil due to their physiological structure;
- Linking women in the Third-World to the environment through their dependence upon it for their survival and livelihood; and
- Tracing how institutional mechanisms and social structures such as caste, class and gender suppress both the environment and women, as part of the larger structures of dominance and insubordination.

The unit also discusses the environmental movement, spearheaded primarily by women to show how they have located themselves as the best supporters of protection of the environment and sustainable development till date. When the world is facing a global crisis vis-à-vis the environment, it is essential for us to understand the ways in which the environment has come to figure in our everyday lives. It is in this sense that we must also strive to protect it. It is no wonder then that an important part of this course tries to look at how this linkage can be established at the level of human relationships, especially that with gender, and more specifically, women.

3.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) How are women related to nature and men related to culture? Explain it in relation to ecofeminism.
- 2) Do you agree with the idea that women are closer to nature and therefore inferior? How does Vandana Shiva formulate this idea? Substantiate.
- 3) What is feminists' environmentalism? Explain it from different theoretical perspectives.
- 4) Discuss the salient features of environmental movements in India.

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