Ecofeminism and Social Ecology in Indian Context: Exploration in Customs, Cultures, and Religions

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The article makes an attempt to explore various social customs, cultures, and religions of India and revisit the concept of ecofeminism and social ecology, which seems to be a dire necessity in contemporary times, especially in the Indian context. India is a land of variegated customs, cultures, and religions. The diversity is not limited to these realms but incorporates multi-racial, multi-spatial, and multi-eras, the ancient, medieval, and contemporary history. The pattern is intricate as these factors affect the eco-diversity in both ways: unsympathetically and chancily. It is ostensibly witnessed that India suffers deplorably in the ecological rondure. Do we need a complete set of anticipatory hermeneutics of variegated Indian customs, cultures, and religions to convalesce the ecosystem? The answer is de-facto 'yes'. The paper indubitably confesses the arrogance and disdain shown towards nature and ecology as a whole in the country that nurtures illogical axioms those which are maintained and adopted in the name of customs, cultures, and religions; and to offer a potent solution, if not to eradicate entirely but lessen the extravagant exploitation of natural resources and building stable ecological equity. Ecofeminism and Social Ecology can be taken to task to solve the grave ecological crisis that India encounters.
Keywords: ecofeminism, social ecology, India, cultural studies, religious studies.

Introduction

"We are going to have a future where women lead the way to make peace with the Earth, or we are not going to have a human future at all," said Vandana Shiva (Faith in the Face of Militarization, 2021: 112).

"Until society can be reclaimed by an undivided humanity that will use its collective wisdom, cultural achievements, technological innovations, scientific knowledge, and innate creativity for its own benefit and for that of the natural world, all ecological problems will have their roots in social problems," said Murray Bookchin (The Murray Bookchin Rader, 1999: 53).

India holds a unique position on the global map. One's diversity is one's unique perceived benefit (UPB), and to sustain till date as one nation is her point of difference. The query remains, are we, as so-called Indians, at an advantage due to the unique diversity we live in? The question is a demanding one and the probe is inevitable in contemporary times. India's enlightenment period dates almost back to the pre-historic era. The civilization is classical and in her evolutionary period, many changes, exchanges, and interchanges developed and continue hitherto. Indubitably it has its flavored richness and amelioration. But there is always a dark side of the moon, so every nation has her/his rear side, which is not always pleasant. So do with India. The land's topography favored a variety of races, religions, clans, and tribes to move from their native lands and settle in India and the Indian sub-continent. Spheres of knowledge, customs, traditions, and faiths found suitable ground to establish themselves with the natives of Indian civilization. Today India is the second-most populous country in the world after China. But China's boundaries are much wider than India's, and the fact cannot be denied. Therefore, vistas of all spheres were enriched, for example, science, art, architecture, a system of education, the birth of new languages and dialects, and most potently, the religious diversity that was never ever devoid of philosophy. In India, 'philosophy is religion and religion is philosophy.' It would not be wrong to assert that all spheres of life are intertwined with religion, say it, India's politics, social norms and customs, economics, social structure with its caste system, gender status and, in fact, all that is in India.

The intriguing fact is, though India is democratic, the ideals of democracy are indispensably knitted to religions (more authoritatively to majority religion). Obviously, the religion of the majority has its strong footing. Therefore Brahmanism (popularly known as Hinduism) so far has been magisterial. According to the 2011 census, the Hindu population is 79.80 %, Muslims are 14.23 %, Christians are 2.30 %, Sikhs are 1.72 %, and others (Buddhist, Jains, other tribal and not stated ones are in 0. something %) (Religion Data Census, 2011).

None of the cultures, races, traditions, and customs of different communities have maintained their authenticity. Hinduism rendered tremendous influence on other faith followers, and some fundamentalist time immemorial have been active instigating populace of the community to sustain the supremacy. Therefore, caste, religious ideology, and gender issues continue brewing, affecting the people's social lives and has rendered cataclysm on the ecosystem, adversely affecting the green environment. Instead of nature's pre-eminence, it is, on the contrary, the dominance of dogmatic ideology governing nature. When women are portrayed in a negative light, 'nature' being feminine is disparately exploited. And since the caste structure that has influenced all religious groups (though they have remained neutral originally), the attitude of dominance has always prevailed on the ecosystem. Precisely to maintain environmental ethics, the need for ecofeminism and social ecology is felt seriously.

Revisiting Ecofeminism in Indian Context

India, being a democratic country, people are free to practice any religion of their desire. And their ideology as one Indian Nation comprises of the philosophy of 'religious tolerance.' Precisely the word 'tolerance' has to be re-examined since how much one can tolerate, especially

in the matter of religion. After seventy years of Indian independence (from the British rule), India as a nation gradually moved towards an intolerant nation, camouflaging herself as 'going back to one's origin' ideology. So, more the majority have realized the potency to be authoritative, more medieval deteriorating social norms in relation to gender are seriously upheld. The position of women in India has always taken a backseat, and nature is seen in parallel to feminine gender also has taken a backseat.

Though women in Hindu scriptures (and other than Hindu religious scriptures) have been respected, reverence has been part and parcel only in scriptures, not in praxis. 'She' is considered as *Shakti* (Divine Power) in Hindu philosophy, as noted by Kinsley, "*Sakti* [*shakti*] means "power"; in Hindu philosophy and theology *sakti* is understood to be the active dimension of the Godhead, the divine power that underlies the godhead's ability to create the world and to display itself… (…) It is quite common, furthermore, to identify *sakti* with a female being, a goddess, and to identify the other pole with her male consort. The two poles are usually understood to be interdependent and to have relatively equal status in terms of the divine economy." (Kinsley, 1986: 133) The Samkhya school of Indian philosophy designates equal prominence to *Purusha* (Soul or Self, the Male counterpart of the Divine Female) and *Prakriti* (Matter/Nature, the Female counter part of the Male, Conscious Self); and the Universe is the composite of both, Male and Female. But, not to ignore, 'She' is still Unconscious Matter / Nature with modes or attributes that make her high or low. Axiomatically 'she' tends to be somewhere inferior to the male. The only sect of Hinduism, *Shaktism*, where the Divine *Shakti*, the Power of the Feminine is worshipped. According to scholars like Arthur Basham, it was pre-Aryan times that *Shakti* worship was popular in India, namely the Indus Valley civilization dates back to ca. 3300 BCE. The entry of the Aryan migration to India and was believed to have patriarchal culture, gave way to male dominance (Basham, 1967; 313). With the popularity of the Aryan establishment, Indian society experienced a complete metamorphosis.

Even deterioration in the position of women in Indian society came through *The Manusmriti* (The Laws of Manu or The *Dharma* [Duty] Text of Manu) (ca. 100 CE). Even today, the text holds an authoritative position in Hindu society that lives in the majority. Though in some verses of the text, a woman is revered, there are an ample number of examples where she is positioned on the dicey ground. As Ghatak notes, "With respect to the purpose of a woman's life, the scripture affirms: 'Woman was created for procreation.' Chapter III of the same scripture avers: 'By a girl, by a young woman, even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own home.' Accordingly, it is stated that: 'In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, in widowhood to her sons; a woman must never be independent" (Ghatak, 2012: 71).

This is immediately translated to 'nature,' and the law transforms from a female individual to Prakriti, 'nature'. Nature is for procreation and is meant for that; nature remains inferior to human beings as women are inferior to men. The ways in which the patriarchal cum capitalist societies have treated women cum nature establish the monocultures. The supremacy of 'men as gender' in society has had its horrendous impact on women and nature in simultaneity.

After the Mughal and later the British invasion, India added positive and negative elements to its already misunderstood culture. The Judeo-Christian view and the Islamic view on 'nature' was equally taken out of context; and instead of 'stewardship' as human being's duty to take care of everything, including nature and all is God's creation, was overtaken by the view that God created nature for human beings' benefit; and to add fuel to this view the verse from Genesis 1:28, 'To fill the earth and subdue it' again gave power for a human being to dominate the earth.

So, the concept of 'stewardship' remained vague and in the name of progress 'nature' was and is always being exploited. This also echoed in the treatment given to women as most people who got converted to these religions followed the old customs of the *Dharma Shashtra* [Test] to treat women as low, corresponding to 'nature' as low.

At this juncture, the necessity of ecofeminism is seriously felt. According to Geetika Khanduja, "Ecofeminism can be defined as a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women" (Khanduja, 2017: 105). After various conferences and workshops by academicians and women in various professions in the late 1970s in the United States that 'ecofeminism' took birth. These ecofeminists confirmed the ideology that women have to end their dominance on nature to liberate themselves. Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether believed that the concept of sin needs to be separated from finitude, and she reiterates the point that matter is always understood as low, for her matter should not be equated with evil. In alliance with theologian St. Augustine and Paul Ricoeur, Ruether agrees to the Original Sin concept but interpreted (hermeneutics intended) the Biblical version not in biological inheritance but historical inheritance by not obeying the commands of God to maintain purity (of the environment as well). Humans have sinned against nature by hazardous use of nature's resources. And it should be well kept in mind, as Ruether noted, the sin should not be attributed to Eve but to human beings in general. Since the patriarchal mentality always has attributed the sin to Eve, and ecofeminist broke this stereotyped patriarchal mentality of attributing all sinful acts to Eve, whatever and whosoever, those who belong to the feminine gender, are also considered low. This finds its immediate translation towards nature (Wiley, 2002: 175-176).

This seems to have a connection to Indian customs, cultures, and religious traditions taken dogmatically. Women have always been placed as subordinate to men, and unless this has not been lifted or erased completely, the exploitation of women and nature will continue. Vandana Shiva, an eminent ecofeminist, has been working on breaking this androcentric attitude prevalent in Indian society (as noted earlier) in Christian society. In her book *Monocultures of the Mind* (1993), she has noted that Western cultures, especially the imperialists' attitude which are deep-rooted now in their colonies, have underestimated the indigenous cultures and traditions of the local regions, and local areas have very easily adapted to the Western ideology of globalization and capitalism that is male-oriented. There women and nature have always been utilized for one's benefit. This ideology finds its support from intellectualizing the religious scriptures and the dharma laws that underestimate the image of women, so also of nature. Therefore, the concept of 'dominance' has seeped too deep in the Indian soil that is wrapped over nature, to control nature and maintain the hedonistic stance in a psychological sense. It has turned out to be too dangerous, resulting in an ecological crisis. To establish equality is society can and will restore ecological balance. According to Shiva, "Diversity is an alternative to monoculture, homogeneity and uniformity. Living diversity in nature corresponds to living diversity of cultures. The natural and cultural diversity is a source of wealth and a source of alternatives" (Shiva, 1997: 7). Shiva believes women work in the field, women consume what is grown on the field, but at the same time, women importantly contribute to growing what they grow. Though Shiva is strongly criticized for being 'essentialist' and 'anti-westernization'; but her philosophy needs to be interpreted in light of imperialism, colonization, and capitalism. Though Indian mythologies and religious scriptures are full of praises for woman, defining her as Mother Earth, the Divine Power behind this Universe, but the Laws of Manu that is in practice that vitiates the Indian scenario. So, when we discuss Hinduism giving sacred place to Mother Earth and women

considered as Divine Power, we have to clarify which Hinduism is one talking about! Is the Laws of Manu or 'the Vedic injunction of worshipping female power and nature and her forces in tandem' – that is first to be sorted out.

It is but obvious that if Indian society opts for philosophy of equality and translates this philosophy into praxis, erasing the age-old customs of dominance and patriarchal culture that is found in dogmatically adopting of the *Dharma Shashtra*s (the theological legal treatises of Hinduism) or the Laws of Manu, an ecological crisis can be lessened and ultimately solved.

Revisiting Social Ecology in Indian Context

Social ecology is quite in vogue in contemporary times as the present ecological crisis is seen to be a deduction of all our social issues. Therefore, social ecology categorically depends upon the external and, more particularly, though not seen on the surface, but felt deeply in the Indian context, as an internal condition. India lives in her diversities of cultures, races, religions, customs, tribes/clans, and languages. As noted in the former sub-topic of this article, there are many kinds of discrimination strictly followed, though the British rule either diluted or completely erased them legally; but under the name of tradition and 'rich heritage' of India, these customs were followed. Oriental religions in India comprise Brahmanism (Hinduism), Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. The foreign religions, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, became and are part-n-parcel of India. They also have maintained a distinct Indian identity. And one important aspect is India's large section is agrarian living in rural regions. So, these rural societies are still struggling to elevate the standard to living. They lack basic amenities like education, health facilities, hygiene, basic infrastructure like proper conveyance facilities, roads, houses, etc. On the physical front, any which ways they lag behind, even if the village is sparsely populated or dense. Above all these difficulties, social structures like caste, class, race, religion, and gender discrimination still prevail. These social issues are the main cause of the ecological crisis. Intercepting at this juncture, the social ecology of Murray Bookchin is essential. According to Bookchin, segregating social issues from ecological issues is a grave mistake and needs to be rectified. They are intrinsically connected. As Bookchin notes, "Social ecology is based on the conviction that nearly all of our present ecological problems originate in deep-seated social problems. It follows, from this view, that these ecological problems cannot be understood, let alone solved, without a careful understanding of our existing society and the irrationalities that dominate it. To make this point more concrete: economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender conflicts, among many others, lie at the core of the most serious ecological dislocations we face today – apart, to be sure, from those that are produced by natural catastrophes" (Bookchin, 2007a: 19).

For most environmentalists, issues are related to nature, say, for example, deforestation, climate change, global warming, pollutions of all types – noise, air, water, soil, etc.; if eradicated, ecological balance can be restored. This is a myth, according to Bookchin. These ecological issues cannot be removed by improving and balancing our eco-bio-diversity, but these problems are deep-rooted in our customs and traditions, which over the passage of years have been followed with observing the social evolution of human beings. The hierarchical structure of the society gives the plutocrats and capitalists to maintain their supremacy as God bestowed gifts (in the Indian context), and therefore, they have the right to dominate other human beings and other human beings creatures. At the same time, the attitude and aptitude of these plutocrats continue even over nature and her resources. De facto, the social issues are needed to be solved first. This will, as a matter of fact, solve the ecological crisis.

The caste system in India has been deeply ingrained in the minds of Indians. Many environmentalists resolutely believe there is an urgent need for a philosophical system that comprehends the connection of the environment to social customs and traditions. The Dalits (were known to be *untouchables*), the subaltern communities of women, tribals, ethnic groups, dialects' group – have directly related to either upholding environmental ethics or maintaining ecological balance that is much needed in every society. But they are always a neglected lot, vulnerable to criticism as outlaws or weak or impoverished. In fact, they are straight away inbuilt in our natural world. The capitalists and the upper caste (mainly the *Brahmin* caste) have underestimated their contribution though they have immensely contributed to preserving nature. The tribals (called *Adivasis*, meaning the settlers before the Aryans entered India, the aboriginal or first natives) have their laws that benefit nature, their medicine system, their nature befitting science and economy, including their polity is environment friendly. But the upper layer of Indian society has always suppressed them and uprooted them by destroying forests and the natural environment. These subalterns never had their say in framing economics, politics, social norms, regulations, or science policies. They are the oppressed a lot, those who have no say in anything. This is an age-old tradition that goes on and on.

The same echo one can hear among suppressed lower castes and the Dalits in India. Since the caste system is justified in scriptural work, at the same time is justified through nature, the elite remains on the apex forever, undermining the lives of these subalterns. Through this, they control the economy and political sphere. By this, the culture of capitalism develops. This is a big setback for the environment as industries grow and the power structure of dominance allows the decision-making in the hands of few. Such contaminated and untoward practices infringe 'laws of nature, consequentially bringing forth ecological crisis. Therefore, according to Bookchin, social ecology is a means to adopt the philosophy of 'communalism.' 'Communalism as defined as a theory or system of government according to which each commune is virtually an independent state and the nation is merely a federation of such states.' (Dictionary.com, 2021). It thereby implies that the political structure of any nation is directly and explicitly in correlation with the economy of the society.

Therefore, restructuring our social organization is the need of the hour. This restructuring will bring a paradigm shift in our political and economic policymaking. He believed that society is destroyed systematically by having market orientation and the competitive mandate of 'either grow or die' policy. As Bookchin writes, "Any attempt to solve the ecological crisis within a bourgeois framework must be dismissed as chimerical. Capitalism is inherently anti-ecological… The destruction of the natural world, for being the result of mere hubristic blunders, follows inexorably from the very logic of capitalist production." (Bereano, 1976; 140). Few examples of that can be quoted concerning consequences of capitalistic hierarchical approach, those which are the cause of concern in India, are as follows:

- Tehri dam disast [Uttarakhand, India].
- The Narmada Controversy (Sardar Sarovar dam) [Navagam, Gujarat].
- Clearing major forest region at Aarey Milk Colony creating space for Mumbai Metro line, Mumbai, India.
- Illegal coal mining in Meghalaya, mica mining in Jharkhand, Dhanbad coal mine mafias in India.
- Deforestation in Jharkhand and evacuation of tribals or shifting or establishing urban lifestyle that uproots the authentic ethnic groups and their culture.

Bookchin believes the mentality of supportiveness is needed rather than the attitude of dominance. And exactly the converse mentality prevails among the bureaucrats and state politicians, those who have undermined the importance of human lives, other than human species and natural wealth. "Thus, in its call for a collective effort to change society, social ecology has never eschewed the need for a radically new spirituality or mentality. As early as 1965, the first public statement to advance the ideas of social ecology concluded with the injunction: 'The cast of minds that today organizes differences among human and other life-forms along hierarchical lines of 'supremacy', or 'inferiority' will give way to an outlook that deals with diversity in an ecological manner – that is, according to an ethics of complementarity" (Bookchin, 2007).

Conclusion

Indeed, India, the second most populated nation in the world, is not just facing problems on the economy or political forefront, but has to deal with fundamental and ground-level problems to satisfy the necessities of food, clothing, and shelter. In all these difficulties, the environmental issues are often side-lined. The ecological crisis needs immediate attention, or we will be extinct as a species. Obviously, India needs both remedial measures to be implemented strictly, namely ecofeminism and social ecology. The following quote by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen becomes pertinent at this juncture, "As competent human beings, we cannot neglect the task of judging how things are and what needs to be done. As reflective creatures, we have the ability to contemplate the lives of others. Our sense of behavior may have caused (though that can be very important as well), but can also relate more generally to the miseries that we see around us and that lie within our power to help remedy" (Sen, 2001: 283).

Ecofeminism and Social Ecology in the Indian context need to be established as the variegated customs, cultures, and religions have somehow contributed to environmental degradation. Since 'nature' is considered female, and as the *Laws of Manu* in some verses does not speak high about women, on the contrary commands to control women; therefore, the patriarchal social structure of dominance immediately translates towards nature. This is also what social ecology claims, to restructure our social customs, cultures, and religions that axiomatically will lead to environmental ethics to maintain ecological balance. In fact, Hinduism proclaims Nature as the revered Divine Power of God to create the world, and the pantheistic view of Non-Dualistic Philosophy too considers everyone equal; unfortunately, the scriptures need to be reinterpreted in the present context. However, Bookchin is firm not to associate ecological issues with super-natural or with spirituality but to be rational enough by restructuring the society to move on the path of anti-capitalistic and anti-dominance systems. As Michael Parenti notes, "Ecology's implications for capitalism are too momentous for the capitalist to contemplate. The plutocrats are more wedded to their wealth than to the Earth upon which they live, more concerned with the fate of their fortunes than with the fate of humanity. The present ecological crisis has been created by the few at the expense of the many." (Parenti, 2007: 97).

The idea of dominance over nature by human beings stems from the dominance of human beings over human beings; let us eradicate the notion of dominance and hierarchy of human beings over another human being in society. This will reduce the exploitation of nature. We need to establish 'libertarian socialism'; and political ideology of 'Communalism' [i.e., A modern definition of social ecology understands it as the interactions within the social, institutional, and cultural contexts of people-environment relations that make up well-being; and to develop

inter-dependencies of social systems]. Last but not least, especially in the Indian context, we need to 're-spiritize of the natural world.'

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