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Exploring the intertwined bond between women and earth

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SHILLONG, Apr 03: Gender is a significant aspect of human-environment interactions. The gendered division of labor shapes all forms of human interaction with the environment. The environment and development debate has put sharp focus on how women's work is directly linked to the environment and thus environmental degradation has harsher impacts on women.

Though women from different strata of the society are differently linked to the nature, but the social construction of 'woman' over civilizations has put this category of population closely parallel to the 'nature'.

Women because of their "biology" per se bear this

compulsion of living their gender- their "femaleness" which gets constructed through the male view. They procreate and it is their duty to nurture the child, father may take the responsibility but socially the accountability lies on women's part ultimately.

The symbolic parallels of woman with "nature", having breasts and womb; and man with "culture", having hands and brains on the one hand broaden the gap between maleness and femaleness, on the other hand put women in close proximity with environment.

The analogies drawn between penis and plough, and vagina and earth, portray how manliness is still represented by the material things and the

womanhood is directly attached with nature. The works of the plough and the earth that is to dig and to receive respectively signifies how oppressive and harassing these relationships are- man-woman and man-nature! Rural and tribal women in India are more closely attached to the nature that is why they are the worst affected by the degradation of nature, that too in very gender-specific ways.

Specifically, in developing world the relationship between woman and environment is an intensifying struggle for survival, for identity which Bina Agarwal rightly terms as "feminist environmentalism"; an alternative formulation to Ecological feminism (Agarwal, 1992).

Analyzing the environment-livelihood linkages especially in the Indian context, it can be concluded that environmental degradation and control over natural resources have strong class and gender implications.

'Poor' and 'women' are badly affected by the power hierarchies operating in this regime, but it is the "poor women" who are the worst affected in such a situation, quite ironically, as they are the closest to the environment and have participated quite actively in environmental protection.

These class-gender implications waste the livelihood options based on the indigenous knowledge and thus place these groups in a high-vulnerability zone where

their very survival is at stake. Though grassroots resistance against the environmental degradation and social inequalities are spreading, the struggles yet remain scattered and localized.

But these struggles raise vital questions which concern with people's sustenance and survival rather than growth and profit-making.

Women are witnessed to be in the forefront of such struggles. Such ecological movements initiated by women are a part of the larger women's movement where environmental and gender concerns are taken together. Another significant concern in such initiatives is the issue of identity; where the efforts are to carve out a niche for their

identity which is based on equality with people and cooperation with nature.

The feminist environmentalism in third world countries also put a question mark on the development paradigm and its conceptualization of human-human and human-nature relationships. The struggle is against the hefty profit making by some people on the name of development where they exploit the marginalized- children, women and nature.

The problem with the governments is that they just recognize that there are deep social and environmental inequities, rather than implementing a policy change that may lead to social transformation.

The approach, however, should be 'transformational' rather than 'welfarist' where development 'of all' and environment 'for all' link to each other in mutually regenerative ways. Decision-making processes should be inclusive and seek active participation of the marginalized groups, to ensure a democratic participation rather than a top-down approach. Localized communities should be actively involved in the planning process which is decentralized.

This would ensure the protection of environment as well as their livelihoods in a sustainable manner, so that the relationship becomes symbiotic and the benefits are shared mutually.

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To encourage the continued use of indigenous knowledge of using and protecting the natural resources, local communities should be engaged in healthy dialogue with trained scientists and concerned departments. There is a need for political mobilization and organization of such groups for their pleading voices to be heard and their environmental interests to be heeded.

In a nutshell, it is high time to envision and tread towards a transformation – from a world full of structural inequities, power hegemonies, tormenting nature and agonized people – to an earth where greens rejoice their melody and women enjoy their dignity.