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Water, Forest, Land and the Girl Child

Nasiruddin Haider Khan

"Ten wells equal a pond, ten ponds equal a large lake, ten lakes equal a son and ten sons equal one tree." -- Matsya Puran

"Pick flowers from a tree, don't uproot it; like a gardener in a forest and not like one who sets fire to everything." -- Garud Puran

The relationship between society and nature is an old one. It might be better to say that this relationship is ancient. It is for this reason that the proponents of a male dominated Indian society make the comparison between sons and trees. And that too where having one son is recognised as necessary for the perpetuation of lineage - there a tree is equated with ten sons.

From this we know the importance of trees in our life. Thus, it has been said in the Garuda Purana, that while the flower may be picked from a tree, the tree itself should not be destroyed. And perhaps, to make people conscious of this idea. it has been said in the Vishnu Purana that the tree is a form of god Anantadev. This is not being cited to give religious importance to trees, rather to develop an approach towards society and nature, of which a major part is constituted by trees.

But today, far from accepting what is said in the Matsya Purana or the Garuda Purana or the principles set out in the Vishnu Purana, we do not even think about this. And the tree which has been equated with ten sons is being swiftly felled, uprooted and murdered. And this violence against nature is having a direct impact on society and particularly on girl children. The link of playing with the environment - and its relationship with the issues of women - is being done by environmentalists all over the world in the last few years. As a result, the academic debate on 'Environmental Women's Science' or 'pro women Environmental Science' has begun. This trend which emerged in the western countries, is now taking root in India, but is confined to semantic debate and discussions.

Women environmentalists like Vandana Shiva claim that in countries of the third world, women - are dependent on nature. They take from nature the foundation

of their own and their family's lives. That is why, the destruction of nature is the destruction of the source of their lives. Shiva claims that the neglect of women's participation in the issues of development is also the cause of the destruction of nature.

Professor Bina Aggarwal of the Institute of Economic Growth in Delhi says that to understand the relationship between men, women and nature, it is necessary to know the reality of the specific forms of their relationship with the environment. In society, there is division of labour based on sex and class (caste/ race) and distribution of property and power. The relationship between people and nature is based on the structure of sex and class (caste/ race) relations. That is why environmental change is also based on the same. And since experiential knowledge of nature is based on the relationship with it, the impact of environmental imbalances correspond to it.

Generally tribal girls and women are the ones who bring fuel and fodder from the jungle. And so, the impact of environmental damage affects them. Similarly, they have a daily relationship with the trees of their area. Through this they have collected a store of experiential knowledge, if the forests are destroyed, there is also destruction of this knowledge. This is not the situation with men or boys. That is why the whole of society does not have the same relationship with nature that women have.

In the Santhal Parganas of Bihar, girls or to put it better - women, are bearing the direct impact of environmental destruction. Santhal girls are having to make up with their 'labour', the scarcity created by this playing about with nature.

The relationship between Santhal society and nature is based on sex and class divisions. The responsibility of collecting food for the family lies with the girls.

Along with bringing fruit and flowers from the forest, they are also dependent on the forest for water, bamboo, herbs, grazing, leaves and manure. This is why Santhal women have a live relationship with the trees of the forest. They are the source of life for them. On the other hand, men's relationship with trees is primarily one of lifting the axe at them. This violence against nature can also be seen in the violence against women perpetrated by men.

Santhal girls are the ones who have to bring drinking water for the house. They also have to take the cattle out for grazing. Among them, it can be seen that the landless, or those who have very little land, are more dependent on nature and the nearby environment. Since they are primarily an agriculture based society - its skills or lack of skills can be seen among the Santhals. Their relationship with

nature is a part of this social structures The people here are primarily dependent on agriculture and forest produce for their food.

In the 1952 National Forest Policy, it was said that forests should cover one third of the area, but in the whole country the condition of forests is bad, it is approximately 20 per cent. The situation of the Santhal Parganas is no different. According to one figure in 1936, 66 per cent of the area was covered by jungle while now it has been reduced to just 10 per cent. In Lalmatiya of Godda district, in the first phase of large scale coal mining alone, one thousand acres of dense jungle was sacrificed.

In almost all areas of the Santhal Parganas, there has been impact of this environmental damage. In the villages of the Masaliya block of Dumka district, almost 90 per cent of the families primarily live off agriculture. The environmental imbalance caused by cutting, of the jungle can clearly be seen. This directly affects agriculture. When the jungle was close by, girls did not have to go far for fuel. They were free of worry about fuel.

For the grazing of cattle too, they did not have to go far. In the months without crops, the animal droppings were left in the fields while grazing and saved as manure. Since the felling of the jungle, there is scarcity of fuel - its collection now takes up a lot of time. Every day girls spend about three to four hours on this. They have to go far to graze the cattle. In the summer days there are dangers attached to this. Apart from this, the animal droppings (gobar) earlier used for manure, are now used as fuel. This has a direct effect on the diminished quality of agriculture.

The making of plates and bowls with leaves is also the responsibility of the girls. The cutting of trees has had an impact on this work. They have to go far to gather leaves. This takes both time and is full of dangers.

The biggest impact of cutting the jungle lies in the scarcity of forest produce and water. In Santhal society, it is women's work to provide food. This is why all work related to this has to be done by them. Santhal society is agriculture based and there is an indissoluble link between water, land and the jungle. From the jungle was collected edible roots and fruit such as jackfruit, mangoes, jamun and mahua - this work was done by women. In emergency situations, when adequate grain was not available from the fields, this forest produce was useful.

Cutting of the jungle and the nationalisation of remaining forest has snatched away a major source of supplementary food from them. The brunt of this is directly borne by the girls. If there is a shortage of fruit in the house, the men are given it. Not only this, earlier forest produce was not sold. But now, because of

economic distress, it is sold instead of being personally used. The situation is the same regarding water. In the Santhal Parganas there are the Ganga, Ghumani, Banski, Brahmani, Ajay and Mayurakshi rivers as also many waterfalls. Apart from this there were sources of water in every village.

As has been said in 'The environment of the Santhal Parganas' written by Nalini Kant - during the rains, rainwater would enter the earth through the roots of trees and this absorbed water would feed the land even after the rains. The village people had adequate supply of drinking water as well as for irrigation of the fields. Whether villages lay in the foothills or in the valleys, people never had to face a crisis of drinking water. But today, with the cutting up of the jungle, it is difficult for the rivers to retain water and the water sources are drying up. Because of this, on the one hand a major crisis has already developed in agriculture - while the drinking water crisis is becoming more and more grave.

Earlier there was no crisis of drinking water. The most serious crisis of drinking water is being faced by the tribals living in the higher regions of the hills. Since water is the source of life, according to the plans wells have been dug and the Government has constructed water reservoirs. But most of them are not working. In Bansjora village, of the five water wells, four are lying useless. The burden of this situation is borne much more by the women - the girls - than the men.

Just as, to make food available is the responsibility of the girls, so also is their responsibility to make drinking water available. For drinking water they have to go a far. In the summer especially, they face difficulty. Because of the scarcity of drinking water, they even have to drink stagnant water, which brings disease in its wake. Painting of the house is a special skill of Santhal girls and their responsibility. For this too, the fetching of water - even walking many kilometres to do so - they have to do. On the road from Dumka to Pakuda, in the morning and evening, girls with water pots on their head can be seen walking great distances.

The water crisis has its worst effect on their health. As for the Santhal men, they walk about bare bodied. In the summer, Santhal girls face severe problems regarding bathing and washing of clothes. This problem is also a source of disease. To highlight the effect of the water crisis on girls - one example is sufficient.

There is a village 'Pahargora', where only 5 per cent of the land is irrigated. In summer the well water dries up. Many diseases spread. This has a direct effect on the girls because they do the work of fetching water. Not only this, earlier, in the ponds or small places where water used to collect - fishes were available and used by the tribals for food. Now fish is becoming scarce and more valuable.

Where fish is available, girls are given less to eat. Fish is mostly given to the boys or men to eat.

The special relationship between women and nature has an effect on their store of knowledge. Because of the daily link with the woodland areas. Women acquire knowledge of herbs and the ability to recognise a variety of medicinal herbs which can cure a number of illnesses. This knowledge has been transmitted from mother to daughter through generations. With the destruction or depletion of biodiversity in the jungles, this special knowledge of the girls is also being destroyed. Because of this, for many illnesses which they earlier treated themselves, now they have to go to 'Hakims' (nature care medicine men) or have to turn to the city. In this too, girls have to bear the greatest loss.

On the one side, their special knowledge of nature is being taken away from them and on the other, the effect is being borne by them. Many of the women's illnesses were earlier treated by themselves. Now with the non-availability of medicinal herbs, they are unable to treat themselves and remain silent about their health problems. Apart from this they used to treat the ailments of their animals too with medicinal herbs. Now, for the treatment of their livestock, dependence on people outside the community - instead of the forest - has increased.

Earlier, they used to run many small forest based handicraft industries in this area, where girls were involved on a big scale. Their handicraft industries are becoming defunct. In the dying industries are primarily tussar, lac and the sewan grass based ones. The adverse effect of this is once again borne by the women.

It is clear that the entire community order of the Santhal tribals is becoming the victim of environmental imbalance - and those who bear the brunt of this imbalance are the girls and the women. The natural imbalances brought into the community order is driving girls on a large scale to seek their livelihood away from the village. Although migration is an old problem of this area.

After the Santhal Rebellion they were sent to Assam, Purnea, Orissa, Champaran as part of a planned strategy. After independence migration is entirely a product of environmental degradation causing imbalances. The effects and scale of migration is largest in the villages of Sahibganj, Deoghar, Dumka, Jamtada and Damini areas. Even today, in the eastern parts of the country, wherever dams or barrages are being built, not only stones but the people who carry stones - especially girls are also brought from the Santhal Parganas.

By building a dam on the Mayurakshi river which flows near the Dumka area, a 'green revolution' has been brought to many areas of Bengal. But the tribals,

living on the banks of the river, have become victims of a "dry revolution." Building of the dam on the Mayurakshi has sweepingly affected the Chapuria village of Dumka. The village pradhan of Chapuria village - Vakil Murmu - said that before the dam was built, more than 200 families used to live there, but now, only 11 families are left. Before the dam was built, land was given to the displaced people in many areas but all of it was high stony land (Tadi) and the people have now scattered here and there.

The uprooting from the land has had the worst effect on girls. There are many villages with the same story. As a result today, large numbers of these tribals - of whom about 70 percent are girls - go to West Bengal for paddy planting and harvesting. The reality is that these Santhal girls are the backbone of the "green revolution" in Bengal. There is a village - Pahudeeha in the Masaliya block. In this village live 30 Santhali families. In the summer only seven old women are to be found in the village. All the houses are locked. They have all gone to bring the "green revolution" in Bengal.

According to the locals, the people of this area go to Bengal four times. Every time middlemen (dalals) called 'Ghumashta' from the districts of Birbhum and Bardhaman come to fetch them. These people go to Padahat, Machanda, Shimla, Mukhra and Babunari. In these areas there are primarily two paddy crops - 'Agahani dhan' and 'Garma dhan'. Both the planting and harvesting of these two paddy crops is their responsibility. They are out for about four months. Since the fare and food for the journey is arranged by the 'Ghumashta', they have to work for one week without payment (begari).

As the moon sets they have to start work which continues till the sun sets. For this whole period which is about 14-15 hours, they receive approximately 25 rupees. Most of the tribals, despite the widespread literacy movement in this area, cannot add or subtract. For this area, the middlemen contractors (Thekedars) often dupe them regarding their payments. The most amazing feature is the use of small girls as labourers. Because of the destruction of livelihood in the village, the whole family has to go out to work to survive. In the villages of Northern Bihar, it is mostly men who go out to work. But here, it is the reverse. In the months of May and June, at the Dumka bus stand can be seen, not one or two, but hundreds of little girls ranging from 10-12 years to 15-16 years of age - all of whom had gone to Bengal to bring the 'green revolution'. Perhaps nowhere else have girls had to bear such a burden of environmental degradation and imbalance.

One point should be outlined - that going out to work does not seem to affect their economic condition. Despite this, they are forced to survive on rice starch and that too is not necessarily available on two successive evenings.

Uprooted from the forest and land, these tribal girls can be seen working in the stone crushing industry on their own land. Uprooted from the land, these daughters of Sido Kanhu can be seen carrying sand in some places and elsewhere carrying bricks. Not only here, but in the capital Patna, large numbers of Santhal can be found in the brick kilns.

In lands alien to them, these girls are often victims of sexual and physical abuse. This is admitted by the local community too. More such incidents take place with the girls going to Bengal. At night, the contractors often enter their camps and make off with the girls. There is no one to stop them.

The special relationship between women and nature cannot be denied, seeing the situation outlined above. If the environment is to be saved, then the participation of women in the programme has first to be ensured. If this is not done - then in the name of social forestry, trees such as eucalyptus and acacia which cannot even be used for burning will be planted. In this area, foreign strains of eucalyptus have been planted.

No political party, including the Jharkhand Party has either made the link between society and nature or made it an issue. It is doubtful that anyone has thought about the special relationship between girls, women and the environment. But now the time has come for it to be made a major issue.

Nature and women both give life. It is upon them that creation and society depends. Today, it is necessary to hand over the entire management of water, forest and land to women, because the nurturing care required to save them can only be given by women, who have the innate capacity for motherhood.