
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.

3.9 REFERENCES

Agarwal, Bina (2007). 'The gender and environment debate: Lessons from India.' In Mahesh Rangarajan (Eds.). *Environmental Issues in India: A Reader*. New Delhi: Pearson India.

Braidotti, R., E. Charkiewicz, S. Hausler, S. Wieringa (1994). (Eds.). *Women, the Environment and Sustainable Development: Towards a Theoretical Analysis*. London: Zed Books with INSTRAW.

Kumar, Radha (1993). *The History of Doing*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Low, Alain & Soraya Tremayne (2001) (Eds). *Women as Sacred Custodians of the Earth? Women, Spirituality and the Environment*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Ortner, Sherry, B. (1972). 'Is female to male as nature is to culture?'. *Feminist Studies*, 1(2), 5-31.

Sarin, Madhu (2001). 'Empowerment and disempowerment of forest women in Uttarakhand, India'. *Gender Technology and Development*. 5(3).

Mahesh Rangarajan (Eds.). *Environmental Issues in India: A Reader*. New Delhi: Pearson Longman.

Salleh, Ariel (1993). 'Class, race and gender discourse in the ecofeminism/ deep ecology debate'. *Environmental Ethics*, 15, 225-44.

Shiva, Vandana (1988). *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Warren, Karen & N. Erkal (1997). *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture and Nature*.

Warren, Karen (2000). *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it is and Why it Matters*. Rowman and Littlefield.

3.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Agarwal, Bina (2007). 'The gender and environment debate: Lessons from India.' In Mahesh Rangarajan (Eds.), *Environmental Issues in India: A Reader*. New Delhi: Pearson India.

Ortner, Sherry B. (1972). 'Is female to male as nature is to culture?.' *Feminist Studies*, 1(2), 5-31.

Shiva, Vandana (1988). *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Warren, Karen (2000). *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it is and Why it Matters*. Rowman and Littlefield.