

Rethinking the Ecofeminist Discourse: View from the Western Ghats, India

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Introduction

The connections between women and nature have been the focus of research attention in recent years. In Western and Indian thought, there are a number of metaphors that link women with nature. Nature is described as 'Mother earth' and the destruction of nature is described in terms of violence like the 'rape of the sea' or 'rape of the earth' (Shiva, "Staying Alive"; Datar; Mies & Shiva, "Ecofeminism"). Women have been in the forefront of a number of protest movements over the environment. In the early 1970s, some of the now well-known environmental movements swept India: at Silent Valley in Kerala against the setting up of a hydroelectric power project, the Chipko Movement in the Garhwal region against the logging of wood for a sports goods factory, the Narmada Bachao agitations against the setting up of hydroelectric power projects in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra & Gujarat. More recently, anti POSCO, Gandhamardhan, Baliapal agitations have protested against the setting up of dams, forest cutting, large mining projects for iron-ore, bauxite or setting up nuclear missile test range in Orissa state. The Jenu Kuruba tribal communities stand against eviction from a tiger reserve and for their land rights (Times Of India), have had women in the forefront of protests.

Besides these movements, there are a number of lesser-known ones where communities have struggled collectively against all odds to regain control over productive natural resources and to defend their livelihoods and lifestyles (Kothari).

This paper attempts to understand one such lesser-known movement, the 'Appiko' chaluvali (to hug movement, in Kannada) of Uttara Kannada district (UKD – an administrative bloc, situated in the Western Ghats) which took place in the 1980s in the southern state of Karnataka to protect the local forests on which the local communities are dependent for their livelihood. While doing so, it will examine what role gender plays in understanding environmental issues; whether there exists a close connection between women and nature uniformly across nations, regions and communities. The paper begins with a review of the multiple and competing approaches to understand the relation between gender and nature in the main tenets of ecofeminism. With an exploration of the alternatives suggested through feminist environmentalism, these relations are then examined in relation to the Appiko chaluvali of UKD. Finally, the paper attempts to rethink the discourse on ecofeminism and suggests the need to look at the women and nature discourse from a feminist political ecology perspective. The paper argues for the need to understand the ecofeminist discourse somewhat differently within India and the Global South.

Gender & Environment: Differing Perspectives

Ecofeminism refers both to movements and to a set of ideas that are at the intersection of feminism and radical environmentalism. It points to the historical, material and ideological connections between women and nature that are both subjugated and dominated. It puts forward a worldview that believes in the care and diversity of all life forms (Terreblanche 163). Movements labelled as 'ecofeminist' like the Green-belt movement in Kenya, Chipko movement in India, the anti-militarist movement in the U.S. and Europe, the movements against the dumping of toxic wastes in the U.S. are dedicated to the continuation of life on earth. They reflect the politics of resistance at the nodes of power that plays out at the micro level. Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, that heralded the second¹ wave of the environmental movement in the U.S., highlighted the harmful effects of pesticides like DDT and the toxic landscape produced by industrial capitalism and the military. Inspired by direct action movements, ecofeminism claims to contribute to an understanding of the

¹ The first wave of the environment movement that started in the late 18th century was marked by three streams: one was the Back to the Land movement that emerged as a moral and cultural critique of the industrial revolution; the second was based on scientific conservation that worked within the framework of development; the third was the wilderness idea that combined science, morality and aesthetics (Guha).

interlinkages between the domination of people and nature by sex, race, class and caste.

The ecofeminist movements emerged in the West in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a product of the peace, feminist and ecology movements. The term ecofeminism was coined by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 appealing for a complete reconstruction of the relations between men and women as well as humans and nature. Ynestra King developed it further pointing to the interconnectedness of theory and practice and highlighted the devastation of the earth by corporate groups as feminist concerns. It is the masculinist mentality that dominates women and nature and which depends on multiple systems of state power and dominance to have its way. The first ecofeminist conference, entitled "Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s," was organized at Amherst, Massachusetts, USA (Spretnak). It examined the connections between feminism, militarism, health and ecology and was followed by the formation of the Women's Pentagon Action, a feminist, anti-militarist, anti-nuclear war weapons group. Protest movements at the grassroots level against ecological destruction, threat of atomic destruction of life on earth, new developments in biotechnology, genetic engineering and reproductive technology, highlighted the connections between patriarchal domination and violence against women, the colonized non-Western, non-White peoples and nature. It led to the realization that the liberation of women cannot be achieved in isolation from the larger struggle for preserving nature and life on this earth. The philosopher Karen Warren ("Feminism and Ecology") points out that ecofeminism is based on the incorporation of multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses, in developing a global perspective on the role of male domination in the exploitation of women and nature. It emphasizes the crucial role that context plays in helping one understand sexist and naturist practices (Datar).

Ecofeminism highlights the existence of important connections between the oppression of women and oppression of nature. The nature of these connections needs to be understood in order to understand the oppression of women and nature (Warren). Carolyn Merchant ("Radical Ecology") claims that for the cultural ecofeminists, in patriarchal society, women and nature are closely (biologically) associated and both are devalued. Within the patriarchal conceptual framework, all those attributes associated with masculinity like 'mind', 'reason', 'rationality' are given

higher value or status or prestige than those associated with femininity, like 'body', 'emotion', resulting in 'hierarchical dualisms' (Warren, "Feminism and Ecology"; Tong and Botts).

Ecofeminists are of the view that it is the "logic of domination," in association with value-hierarchical thinking and value-dualisms that sustains and justifies the twin domination of women and nature (Warren, "The Power and Promise"). For ecofeminists, therefore, the domination of women and nature is basically rooted in ideology. In order to overcome this, one needs to reconstruct and reconceptualize the underlying patriarchal values and structural relations of one's culture and promote equality, non-violence, non-hierarchical forms of organization to bring about new social forms. According to the ecofeminists, one also needs to realize the interconnectedness of all life processes and hence revere nature and all life forms. This essentialist strand of (cultural) ecofeminism celebrates the relationship between women and nature through the popularization of ancient rituals centred on the Mother Goddess, the moon, animals and the female reproductive system that was dethroned by an emerging patriarchal culture with male gods to whom the female deities were subservient. Nature was further degraded by the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, that replaced the nurturing earth with the "metaphor of a machine to be controlled and repaired from outside [...] The earth is to be dominated by male developed and controlled technology, science and industry" (Merchant, "Radical Ecology" 191). So these ecofeminists argue against the dominant view that women are restricted by being closer to nature, because of their ability to bear children. In fact, women's biology and nature are seen as sources of female power to be celebrated. The personal is the political, and hence the female private sphere is just as important and applicable to the male public sphere. Humans should not try to control nature, but work along with it and must try to move beyond power-based relationships. This would mean integrating the dualisms on the polarization of the male and the female in one's conception of reality. Importance should also be given, the ecofeminists argue, to the process rather than only to the goal. One needs to change the patriarchal nature of the system by withdrawing power and energy from patriarchy (Gaard, *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals and Nature* 16-20). Ecofeminist theory has brought into sharp focus the fact that violence against nature and women is built into the dominant development model.

Feminist scholar Vandana Shiva (*Staying Alive*) argues against modern science and technology as a western, patriarchal and colonial project, which is inherently violent and perpetuates this violence against women and nature. Pursuing this model of development has meant a shift away from traditional Indian philosophy, which sees *prakriti* (Nature) as a living and creative process, the “feminine principle,” from which all life arises. Under the garb of development, nature has been exploited mercilessly and the feminine principle was no longer associated with activity, creativity and sanctity of life, but was considered passive and as a “resource”. This has led to marginalization, devaluation, displacement and ultimately the dispensability of women. Women’s special knowledge of nature and their dependence on it for “staying alive”, were systematically marginalized under the onslaught of modern science. Shiva, however, notes that Third World women are not simply victims of the development process, but also possess the power for change pointing to the experiences of women in the Chipko movement.

Gabriel Dietrich points out that Shiva seems to presuppose a society that is democratically organized, where people own sufficient land to survive on its produce. She seems to treat caste factors and political options as non-existent and neglects the realities of hierarchies, subordination, patriarchy and violence within traditional tribal and peasant communities. Shiva is also criticised for considering Third World women as being implicitly closer to nature. Besides, the notions of “Shakti” and “Prakriti”² are posed as representative of Indian philosophy as a whole. One can point out that for Shiva, the “feminine principle” is largely expressed in Hindu terms.

Feminist scholars, such as Cecile Jackson or Janet Biehl have argued that this ecofeminist perspective is “ethnocentric, essentialist, blind to class, ethnicity and other differentiating cleavages, ahistorical and neglects the material sphere” (Jackson 398). Ecofeminist literature portrays as self-evident that any harm to nature harms women equally, since women are seen as closer to nature than men. None of the ecofeminist literature attempts to establish this linkage through concrete evidence or strong argument. These ecofeminist images of women, in fact “retain the patriarchal stereotypes of what men expect women to be. [They] [...] freeze women

² ‘Shakti’ & ‘prakriti’ emerge from Indian cosmology and the ideas of the production of the world through the play of destruction and creation. *Shakti* is the dynamic and creative force that emerges out of this and is the source of everything and pervades everything. *Shakti* is manifested as the feminine principle of ‘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 *Staying Alive* 38). Thus *purusha* and *prakriti* are a duality in unity that are not opposing each other but rather complement each other.

as merely caring and nurturing beings instead of expanding the full range of women's human potentialities and abilities" (Biehl 15). It locates the domination of women and nature mainly in ideology, thereby neglecting the "interrelated material sources of dominance based on economic advantage and political power" (Agarwal 122) as well as the gender division of labour and distribution of opportunity. Critics like Susan Prentice argue that emphasizing the special relationship of women with nature and politics imply that what men do to the earth is bad, unlike women, thereby ignoring the fact that men too can develop an ethic of caring for nature.

Socialist ecofeminism on the other hand locates the oppression of women and nature as a product of capitalist patriarchy. It is the patriarchal relations of production and reproduction that subordinate women and the capitalist relations of production that exploit nature. Since both women and nature are used and exploited as resources, their emancipation can come only with the complete restructuring of society that is based not on profit but on sustainable development. What these arguments seem to overlook is that concepts of nature, culture and gender are "historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and time periods" (Agarwal 123). This essentialism presents women as a homogeneous category, both within countries and across nations. It "fails to differentiate among women by class, race, ethnicity and so on" (122).

Alternatives to Ecofeminism

Bina Agarwal argues against the ecofeminist perspective and instead advocates a "feminist environmental" perspective. It is rooted in material reality and sees the relation between women and nature as structured by gender and class (caste/race) organization of production, reproduction and distribution. Women's relation to the environment is socially and historically variable. Women, particularly in poor rural households, are both victims of environmental degradation as well as active agents in movements for the protection and regeneration of the environment. They act in both positive and negative ways with the environment. Hence, the unquestioning acceptance of the woman-nature link is unacceptable. The growing degradation of natural resources, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the increasing appropriation by the state and by private individuals, as well as the decline in communally-owned property, have been primarily responsible for the increased class-gender effect of environmental degradation. Besides, the decline in the commons that are managed

collectively by local communities, the growth of population, the increasing loss of local knowledge systems due to the increase in mechanisation of agriculture have all led to the environmental degradation that have deleterious effects based on class and gender.

Feminist Political Ecology perspective

Endorsing the analysis of feminist environmentalism, feminist political ecology (FPE) that emerged in the 1990s as an offshoot of Third World political ecology perspective (Rocheleau *et al.*), highlights the intersections of gender, race, caste and class that shape environment relations. Emphasis was laid on the gendered processes in relation to three main themes:

- first, the gendered nature of knowledge production challenging value-neutrality of Western science and the benefits of local indigenous knowledge produced through women's everyday interactions with nature;
- second, the gendered rights in terms of the institutional arrangements that influence women's ability to use, own and manage the environment; and
- third, political activism of women getting organised for collective action with the aim of environmental well-being (Rocheleau *et al.*; Moeckli and Braun).

Rather than adopting the essentialist lens through which a feminist analysis of environment is seen, FPE looks at the power relations inherent in people's access to and control of resources. It emphasises the idea that women too can be creators, knowers and producers of knowledge. Further, issues of social equity and social justice are emphasised in this approach, which focuses on the imbalance of power relations. FPE helps in the gendered analysis of how knowledge is produced and the way power and politics influence the use, access and distribution of resources. It helps in a gendered analysis of grassroots environmental action (Rao "Gender and the urban commons"). Women tend to play a crucial role in grassroots environmental action, even if men are formally in charge. One will examine these aspects through the case study of the *Appiko* (to hug) movement of the Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka in the Western Ghats of India.

Discussing Local Actions in the Uttara Kannada District

The Region: Uttara Kannada District (UKD)³, Karnataka, Western Ghats, India



³ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karnataka_UK_locator_map.svg

The UKD is one of the most densely forested districts of the state of Karnataka in the central Western Ghats in India. The UKD has three distinct topographical areas: the narrow coastal zone; the hilly, forested or *Malnad* zone; and the plains of the eastern zone or *Bayaluseeme* that is contiguous with the Deccan plateau. The UKD lies in the Western Ghats, one of 36 global biodiversity hot spots and is renowned for its richness in wild and domesticated biological diversity. Forests, a dominant feature of the UKD, have been an integral part of the livelihoods of the local farming communities. The spice garden agroforestry processes are crucially dependent on the forests. Collection, consumption, and sale of Non-Timber Forest Produce account for 33 % of the rural household income in the district, making these practices important to local livelihoods. Known as the water tower of the peninsular region, these forests are also the catchments of important rivers originating there. In recent years however, there has been a decrease in the mean rainfall to -17mm which is related to the decrease in forest cover from nearly 80 per cent in the 1970s to approximately 48 per cent in the UKD (Kajal).

Spice Gardens and Agroforestry Practices

The rich biodiversity of the Malnad region of the Western Ghats supports crops such as areca, pepper, cardamom, and many other spices. Hence, any damage to the biodiversity of this region affects the spice gardens adversely. Traditionally, the spice gardens are cultivated in the valleys amidst the thick deciduous forests, thus reducing the requirement for irrigation during the dry season. Horticulture is the main occupation of the region, with rice grown in a few locations at the bottom of valleys and irrigated flatlands. Since there is abundant rainfall during the four months of the rainy season (June-September) in the highlands of the Western Ghats, the prevention of soil erosion and management of water resources are of primary importance for farming. This is done by building storm water drains to channelize the fast flow of rainwater, and by constructing small ponds and tanks for water conservation. The farmers have created sustainable and ingenious farming practices. Spice gardens are multi-layered consisting mainly of rows of areca trees (*Areca catechu*) that support a black pepper vine. Between rows of areca palm, banana is planted and between two areca trees, cardamom is planted. This multi-storey plantation of areca nut, cardamom, pepper, and banana makes optimum use of available sunshine. Spice trees of cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves are also planted

intermittently. The roots of the trees are covered with dry leaves that prevent the growth of weeds and promote the growth of pepper and destroy other harmful fungi. It is an environment-friendly technology, which gives good economic returns (Bellekeri; Rao “Gender and the urban commons”).

The agroforestry practices developed involve animal husbandry as well as dependence on forest wealth, particularly the *Soppinabettas* (the leaf manure forests) lands that are extremely important for the growth of the spice gardens. Local farmers have been recognized for their exemplary animal husbandry practices. Veda Hegde of Neernhalli village (Personal interview during fieldwork conducted in August 2017) successfully runs a large dairy farm with a number of cows and buffaloes, including the local “*Malnad Gidda*” variety. She has encouraged a number of farmers in the district to start dairy farms along with spice gardens. Her efforts were recognized at the regional as well as the international level. Among the accolades she has received are the (Karnataka) Best Farmer award, the American Spring & Pressing Works Ltd. (ASPEE) Agricultural Research and Development Foundation Award and the Swarnavalli Matha Best Woman Farmer Award.

In this region, the Havyak Brahmins are (the dominant) farming community who specialize in raising areca and spice gardens. Other (non-dominant) communities such as Halakki Vakkals, Gram Vakkals, and Kumri Marathas specialize in paddy cultivation while also doing areca and spice gardening. The harvesting, processing, and marketing of the areca and spices is a labour-intensive process that involves skilled labor sought from within the village or outside. This is carried out largely by the Kare Vokkaligas, Halepaiks, Devadigas, Upparas, and the poorer Vokkaligas and Marathas who work as agricultural laborers in the gardens. The men do the job of adding fresh soil, manuring, mulching, as well as the skilled job of harvesting areca nuts and spraying fungicides. Women are involved in the labour-intensive process of collection of dry leaves from the betta lands and placing these on the roots of the areca palm so as to retain the moisture in the soil.

Women’s labour, both within and outside the household, is part and parcel of the agro-ecological system. Shyamala Hegde of Vaddinkoppa, spouse of environmental activist Pandurang Hegde (Personal interview during fieldwork conducted in August 2017), emphasized that farming requires cooperation and involvement from both men and women. Many women also maintain kitchen gardens that provide them a supply of fruits, vegetables, tubers, and flowers, which they exchange and market as well.

These may not have the high exchange value of the areca and spices but are of high use value. Spice gardens are significant in the regional economy as they are linked to a wide range of agro-industries generating employment. Karnataka state contributes a major share in the production of areca nut in the country. Against this background, one will examine the emergence of environmental movements in the UKD.

Appiko Movement: Interlinkages between Environment and Livelihood

The daily lives and livelihoods of the people of UKD are intertwined with forests and environment. As pointed out in the earlier section, the spice gardens of the Malnad region are dependent on the surrounding forests for their maintenance (Bhatt *et al.*). The local communities have developed innovative farming techniques such as *Soppinabetta* lands and constructed the forests over generations. What is portrayed by development specialists and historians is the degradation and destruction of ancient forests due to recent human activity (Morrison and Lycett) whereas the local communities have used and looked after the forests as they are, which among other things, is their source of livelihood.

In the pre- and post-liberalisation (1990s) period a number of forestry, and infrastructural projects were implemented in order to develop a 'backward' region. However, these programs catered to commercial requirements of the state rather than local needs. This resulted in resource exhaustion and several protest movements. Well-known among them is the Appiko movement of the 1980s (Rao "In the margins") that questioned the development project of the state.

In the post-liberalization period, developmental projects have posed a direct threat to the environment of the district. The infrastructure projects, hydro-power projects, increase in leases provided for manganese and limestone mining post the 1980s, the nuclear power project, and the naval base and port development have impacted the forests of the Uttara Kannada region and altered its fragile ecosystem (Ramchandra *et al.*). As the conservation biologist K. Korse from Sirsi points out, vast tracts of pristine forests have been submerged due to hydel and other infrastructure projects, and the displaced families are leading precarious lives. Farmers in the district are thus trapped in the collaboration between the rampaging market forces and state development projects. There have therefore been protests by the local people expressing concern for the environment on which their livelihoods depend.

Remembering and Identification of/with the Appiko Movement

The Appiko chaluvali was spearheaded by the Havyak Brahmins, an 'upper caste' farming community of the region on seeing the devastation of the forests caused by the local plywood factory that had been granted permission by the Forest Department to fell trees. The entire livelihood of the Havyak Brahmins was dependent on the spice garden economy that was closely interlinked to the existence of the forests. They saw to it that the forests were well-maintained since the agricultural economy of the region was dependent on it. Here one can see that the environment and livelihood issues are closely interlinked and hence it is difficult to make a clear dichotomy between the two issues. This can be seen in the various environmental movements in India as well which originated in the struggle in order to maintain the use and control of natural resources, whether it was in relation to land, forests, water or even ponds and wastelands. The major issues were control, accessibility and use between the state and commercial business interests on the one hand and the interests of the rural poor on the other (Sharma, Omvedt). When the local plywood factory began felling trees, devastating the forests, the local villagers were alarmed.

The villagers in the Malnad region were mobilized and they protested the felling by hugging the trees and not allowing the woodcutters to cut them (Hegde). The Appiko chaluvali played an important role in saving the forests of the Western Ghats. During discussions with the activists (fieldwork in the late 1990s) in trying to find out the role and participation of people in the movement in terms of caste and gender, M.N. Hegde, an activist of Gubbigadde village said,

The Appiko movement ran on donations in kind. The villagers nearby provided food and drink. The people would go to the forest in batches and keep vigil day and night. This way the villagers' work in the gardens would not get disturbed. The agriculture of this area is entirely dependent on the forests. If the forests are not there, then the whole economy of the area is gone. Hence protection of the forests is crucial. The farmers here do not need to be taught the relation between forests, water, soil erosion etc. The farmers here grow a mix of crops like areca, cardamom, pepper, banana, paddy, sugarcane, and vegetables. This way they are totally self-dependent. Besides the Havyaks, other castes like Naiks, Karivokkaligas and others also participated in the movement. There was no difference between people on the basis of caste, class or religion. Everyone got together to protect the forests" (Personal communication, 2017).

Anant 'Appiko' Hegde, an activist (who identified with the movement and hence adopted 'Appiko' as his middle name) with the movement, highlights the enthusiasm and vigour of the people in the movement. He narrates an incident during the movement when the contractors were to load trees already felled into a truck. The

Appiko activists set up camp beside it and refused to let the chopped wood be taken out of the forest. Women actively participated in this and kept vigil at night as well and did not allow its removal, explaining to the forest officer that the forests for them meant 'water, air and soil' and not only 'money'.

Describing the efforts and sacrifices made by women to participate in the movement, Gange (mother of a labourer who worked in the spice gardens of the Havyaks) said that they hugged the trees in the forests. They would complete their household care work like cooking and go into the forests. They would take it in turns to graze the cattle. She said that they also participated in the agitation against the Kaiga Nuclear power plant line that was to cut through thick forests. But since it was a project of national importance and for the benefit of the larger public, the forests had to be sacrificed. Pointing to the need and dependence of women from the local communities on forests for food, fodder and fuel, Gange challenged the policies of the forest department that catered to commercial and national needs rather than local needs (Rao, "In the margins").

Gender and Environment in the Appiko Movement

Against this background, one will examine whether the participation of women in the Appiko movement was a historical accident or the product of ecofeminist practices and ideology or a particular leadership strategy. The attempt is also to understand whether women's participation has in any way changed their position within their family and community, and whether it has really brought about a qualitative change in the consciousness of both men and women in that part of Karnataka. What one observes is that while women participated in the movement in large numbers, they did it at the behest of the male leaders of the movement and their husbands. Women participated actively and also led the movement from the front in case of police action. It is pointed out by some of the male activists interviewed, that the women's involvement in the Appiko Chaluvali was 'spontaneous'. Emphasis was laid on the fact that the region has a legacy of women's involvement in movements since the independence movement (Halappa).

However, although women have been actively involved in the movement, it was not out of an 'innate feeling of closeness to nature' per se as argued by ecofeminists (Shiva; Mies and Shiva). Women participated actively in the movement and were fully supported by their family members. They participated in the protests and sit-ins held;

they went for *shibir* (camps), cooked meals for those staying in the camps and so on. Their participation in the movement was within the given patriarchal set-up. It has not led to any radical changes in their position within the family and community. However, it has increased their consciousness regarding the environment, the need to have environment-friendly agricultural practices, and regarding policies of the State Forest Department.

The women do have an interest in environmental protection. Their everyday lives are dependent on the use of natural resources from the forests that are used for their households as well as cattle. It is shaped by the gender division of labour and their material reality rather than being associated with any innate feeling of closeness to nature as pointed out by Agarwal. One should not look at women of the region as an undifferentiated and 'tokenistic' category, but situate them within the local power and authority hierarchies that disadvantage them within the wider social relations (Jewitt 125).

In recent decades, a lesser known but growing economy, which is the home garden agroforestry, has grown in the shadow of the areca-spice garden economy of this region. The gendered practices of the home gardens run mainly by the women of the community provide the vital everyday inputs for the household in terms of vegetables, tubers, medicinal plants, fruit and flower-bearing plants, enhancing household food security, nutrition and well-being. Traditional crop varieties and useful plants are conserved through these 'living gene banks' in the home gardens maintained largely through the labour of women. Though the produce from the home gardens is high in use-value it is low in terms of exchange-value. Women have initiated *Deremela* (flower festivals), the seed collectives, and marketing cooperatives that have given them a sense of empowerment and fulfilment as well as provided a source of vital inputs for the family kitchen. It is in the context of mapping the cultural and developmental contours of this region that one tries to understand the gendered practices of the local communities. It is their knowledge of local plant and seed varieties that have been developed and used for exchange as well as for sale. These kitchen gardens provide the much-needed diverse food stocks that help them tide over difficult circumstances. They have also provided for meeting the dietary needs while at the same time providing cash incomes to the women. It has helped to diversify the home income. The areca-spice gardens are largely a male-dominated agricultural economy. Women on the other hand 'assist' their male counterparts in

farming by providing agricultural labour during the processing of the areca nut and other spices. The kitchen gardens are a fine example of how these women (belonging to Havyak, Hallaki Vokkaligas, Naiks, Siddhis and other caste groups) assert themselves over their independent spaces by engaging in environment preservation activities through social exchange.

Conclusion: Connecting the Dots

How does one analyse the women's involvement in the Appiko movement and their recent efforts to preserve the biodiversity of the region along with looking after their own needs of livelihood and food self-sufficiency? Is the category 'woman' a universal category or do we need to understand the ways in which gender, caste, class and nature are constructed in and through each other? Do we understand it in terms of the essentialist ideas of ecofeminism of women's innate closeness to nature and their special relationship with nature? Do we understand it in terms of the feminist environmental notions of paying attention to the material bases of women's lives? Do we understand it from the perspective of feminist political ecology and the deconstruction of the household and denaturalisation of the relationship between environment and gender?

The Appiko movement and women's involvement in the movement in the early 1980s as well as now, must be seen in the context of a changing plantation economy, the people's dependence on the forests for prosperity and the harsh realities of the struggle for survival of the local communities, rather than in purely ecofeminist terms. While there is no lack of firewood and Minor Forest Produce in the densely forested region of Uttara Kannada district, the drought-like conditions in the recent years are a cause of worry. Women's work in the spice garden economy is immense and requires the work of both men and women. It has to be done hand-in-hand with men and women. Women's knowledge of plants and the requirement of vegetables, tubers, fruits and flowers for the household are encouraged in terms of their kitchen garden agroforestry processes. Since this does not clash with the larger social sanctions, the women are encouraged to start small enterprises like starting a nursery and growing tree saplings and flowers; bee keeping (that is encouraged by the Government too) and sale of the produce in the market or through *melas* (festivals or fairs where they sell their wares).

From a feminist political ecology perspective, one can see how the power relations work where the less productive and less valued kitchen garden agroforestry practices of women are encouraged by the family and society, while the commercially valued areca and spice garden economy is with the men. Seed collectives have brought together women of different caste, class and ethnic groups to share their embodied experiences of environmental degradation and efforts at rejuvenation. Through their collective experiences, they have come together to nurture the biodiversity of the region as well as celebrate their knowledge and experiences together.

Women's involvement in the movements to save the forests of the region as well as their kitchen garden agroforestry practices points to the fact that women too can be creators, knowers and producers of knowledge. As it has been highlighted by the feminist political ecology perspective, it is important to examine the gendered nature of environmental access, use, management and resistance. Hence, what is required is a context specific, situated analysis for a nuanced understanding of the interrelation between nature, gender, class, caste and region. The exploration of the region is important as there tends to be a predominance of women in struggles over environmental justice throughout the Global South as highlighted by the work of feminist political ecologists. As seen in the Appiko movement of Karnataka, while men may have been in charge of the movement, women played crucial roles in the struggle reflecting the gendered dimensions of environmental access, use, management and resistance. Thus this context-based study has tried to establish connections of a local ecofeminist movement in India without recourse to essences [of nature/culture; man/woman] with the way women appropriate public spaces for themselves through economic and social exchange.

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