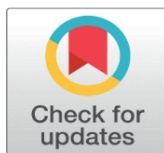
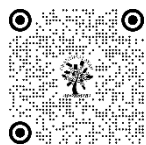


ECOLOGY AND WOMEN: AN OBSERVATIONAL ACCOUNT OF A VILLAGE IN EASTERN UTTAR PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

Ecological changes have attracted the attention of academicians and policy makers alike with the intention to prevent and mitigate the ill-effects associated with these changes. Women have always played a key role in the ecosystem of villages. They have performed certain roles as defined by division of labour based on sex. While discharging such roles certain resources attain primary importance for women and subsequently in the ecosystem of the village.

This paper is an observational account of a village in eastern Uttar Pradesh. It focuses on division of labour based on sex. Women of the said village were dependent on certain natural resources to discharge the duties assigned to them. Women were treating those resources with utmost care and were emotionally attached to them. The paper brings forth the impact of changes in the relationship between women and these resources and subsequently on the ecosystem of the village.

Keywords: Ecology, Women, Indian Village, Change

INTRODUCTION

Ecology has attracted a great concern of experts, scientists, activists and also social scientists. It impacts the life of all living organisms in the world in several ways. The ecosystem that was prevalent once has been altered by various technological, social and other factors. These changes have occurred in domains which are globally common, but at the same time certain changes are specific and local, and vary from society to society. These local changes may not be fully isolated from the bigger impact occurring globally but its social and immediate impact on local ecosystems or relations between humans, various organisms and nature will definitely be specific.

This paper is an observational account of such local changes that occurred in the ecology of a closed village society. The observation out of which this paper emerged was not intended for such writing. Therefore it was not methodologically qualified. Lal Das in his book wrote about such observation that “all such observations are not scientific observations”¹. Because of this technicality I am not claiming that observation was used as a technique of data collection for this article. But it does not mean that the information which was scanned once could not be converted into useful systematic information. This paper cannot be claimed as an ethnographic account though it was an ethnographic observation as it restricted itself with limited aspects only. “Ethnography is a qualitative method for collecting data often used in the social

¹ Lal Das, D.K., Practice of Social Research, Rawat publication, 2004, p.76, New Delhi

and behavioural sciences. Data is collected through observations and interviews, which are then used to draw conclusions.”²

The village under observation is located in the western subdivision of Siddharthnagar District of Uttar Pradesh. The district is located in the north east of UP bordering Nepal. It is populated with around 700³ hundred people and stretches on about 375 acres⁴ of agricultural land at the bank of River Rapti. Most of the families of the village are still associated with agriculture as peasants, labourers and sharing cultivators. Normally families are financially supported by one or more male members who have migrated to Mumbai, Delhi or some other cities in search of work in informal sectors. Five or six people of the village are in formal sectors now.

Like all traditional societies this village also has gender based division of labour. It is the division of labour which is based on gender and not on specialization. This kind of division of labour is traditionally found in almost all societies except in the utopian communist society. Marx and Engle wrote (1845-46/1970:53) that “In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes....”⁵ In gender based division of labour women are assigned the role of home making, cooking, helping males by doing relatively such soft works in manuring, threshing and making hay roofs for their homes. In this article we will try to describe the role of women associated with these activities and their connection with the ecology of the village. This will also cover the changes in the nature of such activities and subsequent changes in the ecology of the village.

Home making is considered the primary role of women in most traditional societies. It includes keeping the house neat and tidy. About 20 to 25 years back the village under observation had broadly three types of houses. One was small houses with walls made of clay and roofs of hay. Building such houses did not require any specific skills. There was no need to import skilled labour from outside the village. These houses could be easily built with only local help. In this way the village was a self-sufficient unit. However, these houses were very few in number. S.C. Dube and M.N. Srinivas challenged the notion that villages were static and self-sufficient entities but it was in economic and cultural terms.⁶

Second type of house was made up of bricks, clay, *Khapdail*⁷ and wood. This was the common type of house found in the village.

The third type consisted of houses made from bricks and cement roofs. This type was very rare. One thing which was common among all the types was that they all had *Kachcha* flooring. *Kachcah* flooring and walls means that they were made up of clay and no cement or tiles were used.

The floor and walls of these houses can't be washed or painted, though they need regular maintenance. Since they are made up of clay, their maintenance and repair can be done by clay only. Here the role of women starts in relation with nature

The village had a pond which was under the control of the village Panchayat. The soil of the pond was very fine and it was used for the purpose of floor and wall maintenance and cleaning. The cleaning of the floor and wall means spreading a thin layer of liquid clay on them. Women regularly used to procure the fine clay from the village pond, which developed a strong bond between the two. Weather also had a say in this relationship. Women normally avoided winter to visit the pond for collecting clay. The cold water made it difficult for them to dive in and bring out the fine clay. In the rainy season the pond normally overflowed and women avoided entering it out of fear of being drowned. Summer was the only good time for procurement of clay. In summer water level went down and being in water gave a pleasurable feeling too. It does not mean that clay was not needed in the rainy or in winter season. For winter and rainy seasons the women preserved and stored the clay by making it dry. It could be used whenever needed by adding water to it. The need for such clay would increase at the time of festivals because everyone wanted to clean and decorate their houses. Clay was borrowed and lent too.

² <https://hrpp.research.virginia.edu/teams/irb-sbs/researcher-guide-irb-sbs/ethnographic-research>

³ The number of population is based on oral rough estimate.

⁴ The size is also not exact but based on rough calculation.

⁵ Ritzer George, Sociological Theory, McGraw-Hill, INC, New York, p. 67, 1992

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<https://triumphias.com/blog/indian-village-life-upsc-sociology/#:~:text=Dube%20and%20M.N.%20Srinivas%20challenged,socio%2Deconomic%20and%20political%20contexts.>

⁷ It is a kind of tile made from clay and processed in kiln.

Class hierarchy also had an impact on this relationship of women to the pond. The upper class women of the village did not have direct relation with the pond but they needed the clay too. The women of affluent families would hire the services of lower class women for procurement of clay in exchange for gifts. But it does not mean that women of the upper class did not have close relations with the pond. They also had the same bond with the pond that a lower class woman had.

The clay was also used to make big containers to store grains. These containers were more useful for upper class than lower, because the upper class needed to store more grains. Clay was also needed for making local stoves used for cooking. Such activities exhibit the artistic activities of women too.

This relationship of women with the pond developed a concern for the pond. Because of this concern, the men of the village did not over-exploit the pond for their purpose. They respected the water, boundary and cleanliness of the pond. Changes in these needs changed the relationship of the village women with the pond. Most houses were gradually converted into *pucca* cemented buildings. Clay containers for grain storage have been replaced by tin containers and clay stoves by gas stoves. Now women don't need clay for any of the aforementioned works. This change reduced the concern of women about the pond which led to decreased visits and subsequently cleanliness of the pond. Less concern of women provided opportunity to men to overexploit the pond. Now the pond doesn't have water in it round the year and it has lost its identity almost completely as men whose lands surround the pond have encroached upon it by filling it partially. Fuel for the kitchen was one of the basic needs of each household. In most cases, the arrangement of fuel for the kitchen was considered the duty of women. Gas stove was rare. Locally designed stoves of clay were commonly used in kitchens. These stoves needed firewood or something similar to it for cooking. This activity also had class reflections. Few affluent people in the village owned orchids, trees, more cattle and bigger pieces of land. Women of such families did not connect themselves directly with fuel arrangements, but they had a concern with the resources. Trees, orchids, cattle and agriculture were the primary suppliers of cooking fuel in the village. Trimming of the trees on an annual basis provided enough cooking fuel for those who owned them. Cow dung was also used as a primary source of cooking fuel by most of the villagers. Remains of crops after threshing and husking were also used for cooking in villages. In this case most of the sources were primarily owned by individuals and not by the community, unlike the pond that was accessible to all. Those who owned the resources mentioned above were directly dependent on them for kitchen fuel. They were less in numbers though. Most of the village women who did not own the resources were dependent indirectly on those resources for procuring fuel for their kitchen. This indirect dependency means their participation in the process of converting raw to kitchen fuel as labourer, such as in threshing, husking and making dung cake to be used as fuel etc. Such participation gave them some share in the things used as kitchen fuel. This entire process predominantly revolved around women only. Engagement of labourers, which was normally women, for the above mentioned processes were dealt by women of those families who owned the resources. It was also observed that women of lower class families collected the fallen leaves from the gardens and cow dung when the cows and buffalos were taken out for grazing. All these activities were just to manage the fuel for their kitchens.

Kitchen was a continuous activity for women of the village. The relationship of women with the sources of fuel acquired a very important place in their lives. Women respected the fuel and its sources. They developed indigenous techniques to preserve the fuel for the rest of the months, especially for the days of scarcity and rainy season. The preservation of cow dung cakes and remains of crops after threshing was so eco-friendly as it did not disturb even the smallest thing in the ecosystem.

Technological changes in agriculture brought many other changes. Tractor based ploughing replaced the bulls and cows. Bulls were used for ploughing and cows for milk and to get good bulls. Dung vanished with the replacement of cattle by tractor and machine. Mechanised threshing left the remains of the crops of no use. Deforestation also led to the scarcity of leaves and twitches to be used as kitchen fuel. Women were now less dependent on these natural resources and therefore their relationship and concern for the ecosystem of the village also decreased.

Earlier kitchen appliances were also produced locally from available material. Women used stone sills for mixing and grinding spices. These sills were locally made by a specific community. This community's livelihood was depended on selling and maintaining these sills under the *Jajmani* system⁸. Locally knitted pots, to be used as today's hot-pots and plate shaped items for keeping dry dishes, were used in almost all households. These items were knitted with a raw material obtained from a bushy plant generally grown on waste lands. This plant is locally called *mooj*. From the same raw material women also knitted hand fans to be used during summer.

⁸ It is a system of rural economy. In this system a person from some occupational caste offers services against goods.

The relationship of women with this bushy plant was also a close one, as they preserved and expanded them. But with the replacement of such sills and locally knitted pots by mechanical grinder and factory made pots weakened this relationship. Gradually these plants vanished. Of course these plants were homes to many birds and small animals. Hay roofing was the other activity which depended on the remains of certain crops such as sugarcane, pigeon pea etc. Threshing of such plants was done very carefully as to maximise the use of remains. This dependency gave equal care to the grains and remains both. The remains were also kept with full care of protection and preservation. They were protected well so that no animal could damage them. With the intention of getting the best remains women used to participate in the process of threshing, winnowing and husking. These remains were also used as fuel for cooking. There were other activities too which were particularly associated with women and were considered important in the ecosystem of that time. Women could earn by selling the goats, hens, eggs, milks and other such things that they get from the animals. Such income encouraged women for cattle rearing. Cattle rearing were domestically fit in the ecosystem of that time. Crop patterns were different, ponds were available, hay and clay was abundantly available for making and roofing of the huts for domestic animals. With the change in the above mentioned patterns of life, keeping animals became very difficult. Grazing lands were converted into agricultural lands. Mechanised threshing took away the remains of crops which were used as fodder for animals and roofing.

CONCLUSION

Ecofeminism believes that women and the environment were over exploited by men. The observation presented above revealed that the relationship of women with nature was closer and more intimate than men. This relationship was closer because of the fulfilment of certain needs which were supposed to be managed by women according to sexual division of labour. The non-exploitative relations of men with such resources were not because of kindness but rather because of direct or indirect pressure of women on men.

With the change of needs the resources which were once very close to women lost their importance. Hence the relationship of women with the immediate ecosystem weakened. This weakened relationship in turn released the pressure on men not to overexploit the resources. All these changes led to changes in the entire ecosystem of the village.