

WOMEN & ENVIRONMENT

Since beginning women have played a very pro-active role in matters concerning environment at local, regional and national and now at global level. Johannesburg Summit 2002 released the Women Action Agenda for a healthy planet 2015 where it described the inter-relationship of global economic and political forces with social and cultural factors more understood by the women. In 1995 the U.N Conference on Women in Beijing, China brought a new document called "Women and Environment" with three main objectives (1) involve women in environment decision-making; (2) integrate policies and programmes with their problem for a long term development; (3) establish mechanism to calculate the impact of development and environmental changes on the lives of women.

Much before this history has recorded several cases of individual women who have played a crucial role for environment like Gauri Devi of Himachal Pradesh, the Green Belt Movement in Kenya launched by the Women Groups or individuals like Donella Meadows, Noreena Hertz just to mention a few.

Women stay at the centre of a circle. The circle is formed by their relationship with family, relationship at home, relationship with food and fuel, farm and fodder needs outside home and also their relationship with nature for social needs. Anything which interferes with the circle affects women and all that maintains a circle is strengthened by women. That is the reason why women are central to environment. This has been recorded also in the year 1992, for a woman, named Jhulekha Begum from Bangladesh who said "My Environment is My Life".

Women are a connecting bridge between social and the physical environment and her activities bring the relationships clear. All the natural resources like gathering of food, collection of fuelwood or cutting of fodder for animals and managing agriculture lands or doing plantation for fruits and flowers, vegetables including giving water are mainly done by women and therefore they understand environment better than any other person. This is the reason probably why the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA), public hearing and special rights for locals including fishermen in relation to any project have been added for clearance of a new project in their environment.

One cannot forget the contribution of Amrita Devi, a Bishnoi woman, who lost her life in Jodhpur. When the Maharaja wanted to build a new palace and required wood for it, the *khejri* trees were being felled and she rushed to site to prevent it and when she hugged the first tree the axe fell on her and she died on the spot. When other surrounding people rushed to her and died in the same way, the King realized that lots of people have lost their lives and after that the King stopped cutting of trees for timber.

The Chipko ("*chipko*" means to hug) movement also started in 1974 under the leadership of Gauri Devi who organized the women to hug the trees and prevent their cutting. Their actions lead to their victory and the same acts were repeated in other parts of the present hill State, named, Uttarakhand and thus women were seen as providing the environmental solutions.

In Japan in 1950s, the Nakabaru and Sanroku Womens' Society opposed pollution from industries and power plants in Tobata region. They

perceived the health of citizens going down and started collecting data, got new knowledge through field survey and claimed their rights for safe and healthy environment. All this led to major programmes on pollution prevention by the Japanese Government and Corporations which continues even today. In Kenya, it was Professor Maathai, a woman biologist of Eastern Africa, who started the Kenya's Green Belt Movement in 1977 to conserve the indiscriminate cutting of trees by the corporate and industrial groups in their area. There are hundreds of instances of such women activism in various parts but the important point that needs to be mentioned is they perceive the health and quality of life better and perform the role of allocating new roles other than reproduction and productive work at home. To see that needs and environment do not get completely out of shape, it is environment outside home which gives them answers in matters of health, livelihood, leadership and also human rights and therefore environment is an area for them where they play a very proactive role and this has also been recognized in the Climate Change Network Group. The gender perception in our climate change action programme has become now a very important component. The role of women cannot be limited to the role of a complainant or becoming an

instrument for conservation of environment or its damage can be put on their shoulders alone. The role of women has to be seen in a way where their empowerment, participation and contribution to environmental policies become the mandate of all Governmental and local self-government bodies at every level.

Books can be written for every region about women preventing nature, conserving resources and liberating their families but what is not written is their innate understanding and eye for nature and their participation in nature as a user of resources in land, forests and water. They in their role as sister, mother, wife or daughter have a duty to perform through agricultural farms, water conservation, plantation, nurturing food needs, collecting fuel wood for their fireplaces to start and doing fodder collection for taking care of the animals which give fertilizers, milk and peace of mind to them. This scenario is true across the globe and it's the global face of women and therefore any attempt or action leading to environment degradation, deforestation, pollution and disappearance of biodiversity can only endanger the women and their rights or role and therefore environment has to be always women centric in order to be more

sustainable in future. This applies to all projects whether coming up on coastal line or main land or on the hilly tracks of the country.

