

## Chapter: 5

### Gender & Environment: Issues of Convergence

#### 5.1 Introduction

The environment and gender have several points of convergence. The 1992 Earth Summit of Rio de Janeiro altered the discourse of environmentalism. Its significant inclusion of sustainability in the agenda of environmentalism reoriented world environmentalism. It has shifted the prevailing discourse of staging environmental crisis to the idea of implementing long term sustainability. It advanced a new cultural politics which is based on how humanity should live with nature. A new equation of democratic praxis emerged as a result of the Rio summit which encompasses “feminism, environmental Justice, multicultural Concern and north- South conflict” (Merchant 1999, 205). This new cultural politics gave prominence to women and their experiences.

“Gender dimension of environmental issues rest on two linked claims. The first is that women and men stand in a different relationship to their environment, that the environment is a gendered issue. The second is that women and men are more responsive to nature” (Mellor in Eaton and Lorentzen 2003, 12). Gender has hardly been a part of academic discussions on environmental issues in Assam. In this chapter the relationship between women and environment is discussed in the context of Assam. The report of a research done by the Centre for Environment, Social and Policy Research (CESPR) a Guwahati based organization stated that rapid climate change in the state has dramatically changed the lifestyle and livelihood of thousands of women in remote areas of the state. They have conducted research in six different districts of various parts of Assam. Their study reveals that women who were earlier dependent on agriculture have been forced to take up other livelihood options as a result of natural catastrophes. This chapter will discuss the women-environment relationship by incorporating the field experiences of the researcher.

In this chapter I aim to move beyond discourse to the material existence of people. In the previous chapters we have looked at how different players use the

environment to construct their own version of “reality”. The purpose of inclusion of this chapter in the thesis is to know the lived experiences of people. I have used ethnographic data for the justification of my argument. The ethnographic data will reveal the ground reality of the situation regarding why gender dimension is important while talking about the environment. It will also compare the “mainstream” Indian idea of the woman-environment relationship with that of Assam. The “mainstream” Indian idea of the woman-environment relationship is mainly based on the ecofeminist perspective which has a strong tradition in India. I have given a brief overview of the woman-environment relationship by using and examining the perspectives offered by ecofeminists. I try to incorporate the voices of the common women who are living with the environment. As we have seen, the voices of the poor and deprived hardly find their way through the maze of environmental discourses. Looking beyond discourse at the actual experiences of people is thus an imperative.

This chapter therefore has a twofold aim. Firstly, the idea is to move beyond the reductive understanding of the environment as discourse.

Following Foucault, Derek Hook has pointed at the folly of reducing the analysis of discourse merely to the ‘markings of a textuality’; instead, one should contextualize it in the “physicality of its effects”, in the “materiality of its practices” (Hook 2001, 28). Foucault believed that critical readings, like interpretative exercises, will be insufficient if they will allow one to deny the materiality of discourse, thus eliding much of its force, and will hence result in the crippling of the political impact of our analyses. Unfortunately, reductive understandings of discourse have prevented us from looking at its materiality, at the ‘extra-discursive’.

Secondly, there is a need to look beyond hegemonic academic discourses about the woman-environment relationship which constructs the image of the normative female ecological subjectivity and compare it with the materiality of life of women from Assam. Owing to the vastness of the field, I limited my study to three districts of Assam which have been in the news in recent times owing to the impact of different development projects on the lives of people. While issues of

environment in the context of Assam have primarily centered around questions of ethnicity and indigeneity, there is definitely a point to look at it from the perspective of gender. Ethnicity and indigeneity have generally sidetracked issues concerning women and gender in Assam. The discursive formation of the environment in Assam, as we have seen in the previous chapters, mainly revolve around questions of resource-use, the first access to which, as has been felt, should be that of the indigenous communities, the sons of the soil. In this discourse of indigeneity, woman does not figure as such.

The narratives collected from the field in this chapter will give us some idea about the situation of women's lived experiences. It is particularly interesting to look at the experiences of women who live in the greatest proximity to nature. This chapter is therefore an attempt to answer the following questions: Is there any special relationship between women and environment in this part of the world? What discourses are framed out of the relationship between women and environment? How is female subjectivity constructed within the convergence of gender-environment discourse? Can they be categorized under the umbrella of discourse of ecofeminism?

## **5.2 Women and Environment**

“Women's concerns about the environment derive from their experiences of particular problems experienced in private. The environment becomes an important issue when it impinges on the security of the personal sphere, the home, the family. The personal, for women, are significantly expressed in private actions” (Sandilands 1999, xii). Sandilands' view about the relationship between women and environment is quite relevant to the context of women in Assam. In this connection Carolyn Merchant's views are worth citing. According to Merchant, “The word ecology derives from the Greek word “oikos”, meaning house. Ecology, then, is the science of the household- the Earth's household. The connection between earth and the house has historically been mediated by women” (Merchant 1996, 139).

Carolyn Merchant's analysis about the women-environment relationship links the hierarchical, mechanistic approach of Western civilization to the oppression of

women and nature. Merchant proposes two divergent views about the images of women and nature in the pre-sixteenth century Europe. Women are compared with nature, specifically the earth, which has been constructed in the image of a mother. The woman is thus a nurturing mother. On the other hand, the opposing image reflects the wild and uncontrollable characteristics of nature which are seen to be comparable with that of women. When nature becomes wild and uncontrollable it turns violent and can lead to devastation. With the growth of industrialization in Europe the market oriented culture highlighted this image of earth as a living female that had to be 'tamed' and 'domesticated' for productivity. This idea gave birth to a mechanistic worldview and nature was regarded as an object to be dominated and controlled by man. According to Merchant,

The ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother links women's history with the history of the environment and ecological change....In investigating the roots of our current environmental dilemma and its connections to science, technology, and the economy, we must reexamine the formation of a world view and a science that, by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism, sanctioned the domination of both nature and women. (Merchant 1980, xx)

According to that philosophy women and environment have been seen as two sides of a coin. Women are regarded as being closer to nature and men are seen as being closer to culture. This dualism is nothing but a construction of culture. She was criticized for essentialising as well as over-romanticizing the woman-nature relationship.

In the Indian context the word "Prakriti" is used to define the essence of womanhood. "Prakriti" is the Indian synonym for nature. The striking point is that in the Indian context women are equated to culture. In ancient times the position of women in Indian society was relatively better though they were generally subordinate to men. Women in Indian culture are equated to culture. They are regarded as representative of culture who bearing the burden of carrying culture. "In India, as in many other non- Western societies, the burden of

protecting and preserving the ‘true’ and ‘original’ culture of the country rests on its women...In the non- west, the ‘culture question’ becomes a ‘national culture question’ with serious consequences for women.”(Nath and Dutta 2012, 13). Hence, it can be said that there exists an “intrinsic” relationship between nature, culture and women in the Indian context.

### **5.3 An Ecofeminist Analysis**

The relationship between women and environment has become a serious cause of concern as it has invited attention from different perspectives. Various analyses have focused on the critical relationship between women and environment as well as the structure of the power relation between the genders. Ecofeminist theory has analyzed this relationship from a critical point of view. According to the ecofeminists women and nature possess a special relationship. This can actually help in the process of conserving the environment. They argue that this relationship has empowered women to protect the ecological future. According to the ecofeminists women are regarded as closer to nature in patriarchal culture. Nature is regarded as inferior to culture. They argue that both nature and woman are objects of domination and exploitation. The ecofeminists as well as the radical ecologists believe that anthropocentrism marked man’s relationship with the environment since the industrial revolution.

The exponents of ecofeminism discuss the women-nature relationship on the basis of three issues of convergence –the empirical, the conceptual and the epistemological (Eaton and Lorentzen 2003). Empirically, women are more affected by environmental destruction in comparison to men. In many societies it is an “established fact” that the burden of the women is greater than men in many spheres. The burden of women is manifold whereas the sexual division of labour determines the duty of a woman both in the public and private domain. In this context women are regarded as the primary caregivers and they have to bear the responsibility of food and health of the family. She needs to provide food, fuel and water for the whole family which is becoming increasingly difficult. The empirical understanding of the woman-environment relationship tries to examine the socio- political and economic structure. These structures are regarded as

responsible for the ecological deprivation and powerlessness of women in the matters of economy and property relations.

The second principle of ecofeminist discourse is that Euro-Western thought views women and nature as connected conceptually as well as symbolically. The ecofeminists view the world as hierarchically and dualistically divided. Traditionally, woman is identified with femininity, body, sexuality, earth or nature and materiality whereas man is compared with masculinity, the mind, heaven and the supernatural. These dualisms rest on the reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature, heaven/earth, and man/woman binaries where the first category gets priority over the second. “Ecofeminists refer to these pairings as hierarchical dualisms and claim that they point to a logic of domination that is entrenched in Euro-Western history and worldviews. Religion, philosophy, science and cultural symbols reinforce this world view, making male power over both women and nature appear “natural” and thus justified” (Eaton and Lorentzen 2003, 2). The whole idea of women and environment relationship is thus deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition. The ecofeminist discourse points at the symbolic construction of the woman-nature relationship. These symbolic constructions are the result of the pattern of social structure, various sexual norms and the ideological paradigms of a society.

The epistemological claim of ecofeminism concerns women’s knowledge of the environment. Because of social and economic exigencies, women possess greater knowledge about the environment than men. Whenever there are environmental problems women are the worst affected. Ecofeminists argue that women’s knowledge about the environment could be useful for combating environmental problems.

Vandana Shiva (1988, 89) has discussed the relationship between women and nature by incorporating a materialist perspective. Shiva argues that both women and nature are the victims of violence in the dominant industrial or development model. She characterizes it as a colonial imposition. Shiva has pointed out that the patriarchal nature of western development model violated the integrity and harmony of the woman-nature relationship. She identifies it as a radical

conceptual shift from the traditional view about the relationship. According to Shiva this shift was repressive and violent. Women were devalued and marginalized in line with the devaluation and marginalization of nature. “For women, whose productivity in the sustaining of life is based on nature’s productivity, the, death of Prakriti is simultaneously a beginning of their marginalization, devaluation, displacement, and ultimate dispensability. The ecological crisis is, at root, the death of the feminine principle, symbolically as well as in context such as rural India, not merely in form and symbol, but also in the everyday processes of survival and sustenance ” (Shiva 1989, 42). Shiva has pointed out that the violence against women is linked to the material conditions of their existence. She has given the example of the third world women, especially of India, who are more dependent on nature for their livelihood. They have special knowledge regarding the protection and conservation of the environment. The destruction of nature immediately leads to the destruction of their sources of livelihood. She sees that the patriarchal project of development has devalued and marginalized women’s special knowledge about the environment. The essence of Shiva’s thought is that there is an intrinsic relationship between women and nature.

#### **5.4 Ecofeminism in India**

In India the relationship between nature and women is a distinctive one. The movement of ecofeminism has a long history in India. “Women’s environmental action in India preceded the UN Women’s Decade as well as the 1972 Stockholm Environment Conference. Three hundred years ago more than 300 members of the Bishnoi community in Rajasthan, led by a woman called Amrita Devi, sacrificed their lives to save their sacred khjri trees by clinging to them. With that event begins the recorded history of chipko” (quoted in Shiva 1989, 67). The Chipko movement has offered a fertile space to develop ecofeminist movement/scholarship in India.

Vandana Shiva stated in an interview with the Wall Street Journal, “Even as a physicist, I was involved in the Chipko movement in my home region of Garhwal in the Himalayas since the 1970s. [Chipko, which implies hugging trees to

prevent them from being chopped down, was started by local women to protect the Himalayan forests.] Through Chipko, I realized there's an intimate connection between nature's economy and the sustenance economy that women look after, as well as a common attack on both from a greed economy. My philosophy on ecofeminism and earth democracy was inspired by these connections.”

Ecofeminism holds the Chipko movement as an example of the ecofeminist movement in India. In the year 1970 a group of women from a village of Uttar Pradesh in the Himalayan region staged a protest against deforestation. These forests were at once the commonly owned, controlled by the local population. These forests were their source of timber and fuel wood for cooking. The introduction of new forestry practices during 1970s changed the pattern of control. Some outside industries came up there and they wanted to develop a logging industry. The people of this region organized themselves in a non-violent way to protect the local forests. It was a movement that followed the Gandhian model of protest. The activists of Chipko called themselves *the Chipko*, tree hugger. This movement has developed the concept of tree hugging to stop the activities like deforestation, lumbering and mining. The women and children of that area encircled their arms around the trees which the loggers wanted to cut. Therefore it is popularly known as a women's movement. “The history of Chipko is a history of the visions and actions of exceptionally courageous women. Environmental movements like Chipko have become historical landmarks because they have been fuelled by the ecological insights and political and moral strengths of women” (Shiva 1989, 67). Thus Chipko is defined as an ecofeminist movement by scholars like Vandana Shiva. It was the first organized environmental movement which was not only protested against deforestation but also against outside control. For the villagers the trees were the common goods of their economic life. They had an economic, material and emotional relationship with the trees. “Chipko process as a resurgence of woman power and ecological concern in the Garhwal Himalaya is a similar mosaic of many events and multiple actors” (Shiva 1989, 68).



Ecofeminists pointed out certain significant elements in the Chipko movement. The locals, with their expertise about the ecosystem, held privilege over the outsiders. Ecofeminists note that the perspectives of these women did not get importance. Secondly, the women were staging a protest against the government decision as well as against their local men – the husbands, brothers and fathers. Ecofeminists pointed out that the Chipko movement was nothing but the protest against capitalism as well as colonialism. Women were more vocal as they were protecting the means of their basic needs of livelihood. The material needs of women for their survival was the main point of consideration in the Chipko movement.

During the 1970s and 1980s a number of conflicts took place in different parts of India. The initiative taken by the Chipko movement was exemplary. The main causes of those conflicts are the problem of access to the natural resources, the ill effects of industrial pollution, conflicts over constructing the large dams, conflicts over the land rights of the indigenous people etc. “These conflicts are played out against a backdrop of visible ecological degradation, the drying up of springs, the decimation of forests, and the erosion of land. This has led, in turn, to acute resource shortages, and hence to the clash between competing claims: be they of peasants and paper mills over forest land or of country boat owners and trawlers over fish stocks” (Guha 2010, 72). Guha again opines,

“Where “traditional” class conflicts were waged in the cultivated field or in the factory, these newer struggles are waged over the gifts of nature, such as forests and water, gifts that are coveted by all but increasingly monopolized by some. The language of class is apposite, for most of these conflicts have indeed opposed rich to poor: logging companies against hill villagers, dam builders against forest tribals, multinational corporations deploying trawlers against artisanal fisherfolk rowing country boats “(Guha 2010, 72).

This indicates that class struggle has been one of the important characteristics of the environmental movement. It is indeed the struggle for equality and justice regarding resource use. Their style of protest is very often influenced by Gandhian ideology. Among them Narmada Bachao Andolan as a protest

movement against the building of Sardar Sarovar Dam on the river Narmada is the most influential one. The significant point here is the leading role played by the women in this movement. Women used to take active part in various conflicts. They staged protests against deforestation, displacement caused by various development projects. Women used to take a leading role in organizing various environmental restoration programmes, afforestation programme, and they controlled use of local resources. This has led the thinkers to view the environmental movement from the lens of feminism. According to Indian philosophy, women are closer to nature. Destruction of environment immediately causes threat to the survival of women. According to Shiva there exists both ideological as well as material link in the matter of violence against nature and women. The women from the third world depend on nature for their daily sustenance. The destruction of nature immediately leads to the destruction of their livelihood. By rejecting this ideological treatment of analyzing women-nature relationship, critics like Bina Agarwal and Meera Nanda opine that class can be a better approach to view this relationship. Bina Agarwal, while criticizing the Ecofeminist approach, commented on this conceptual principle in the following way-

In the ecofeminist argument [...] the connection between the domination of women and that of nature is basically seen as *Ideological*, as rooted in a system of ideas and representations, values and beliefs, that places women and the non-human world hierarchically below men. And it calls upon women and men to reconceptualize themselves, and their relationships to one another and to the non-human world, in non-hierarchical ways (Agarwal 2007, 317).

Agarwal's approach for studying the relationship is termed by her as feminist environmentalism. According to her gender and caste based division of labour affects the structure of relationship between woman and nature. In this way, she challenges the ideological construction of the women-nature relationship offered by ecofeminists. Bina Agarwal views that the relationship of man and woman with nature should be understood from the context of their given material reality. According to Bina Agarwal, "the link between women and the environment can be seen as structured by a given gender and class (caste/race) organization of

production, reproduction and distribution. Ideological constructions such as of gender, of nature, and of the relationship between the two, may be seen as (interactively) a part of this structuring but not the whole of it” (Agarwal 2007, 324).

While accounting the movement of ecofeminism in India we cannot proceed without emphasizing the many instances of such activism in India. The main point is that the women from the rural and marginal sections have to suffer a lot at the time of environmental degradation. Environmental degradation possesses the biggest threat to the survival of this section of population. Actually they are greatly dependent on environment for their daily needs. This has led a large number of women activists to participate in various environmental movements in different parts of the country. Among them the names of Gaura Devi and the other legendary women of the Chipko movement, Medha Patkar, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy and C.K. Janu usually come to our mind.

Guha remarks, “Patkar’s predecessor in the Himalaya was Gaura Devi, a remarkable and still unsung heroine of the Chipko andolan. The story of this illiterate woman activist provides us in fact a deeper insight into the constituent elements of an “environmentalism of the poor” (Guha, 2010, 75). Gaura Devi was the leader of Mahila Mangal Dal which was the first group of Chipko movement to move against the state decision. She was a widow and at the same time she was illiterate. But her step against the state’s decision stood made her a pioneer not only for Indian environmentalism but also for world environmentalism. The inhabitant of her village used to call her ‘Ma’ (mother).

Medha Patkar is another influential figure of recent times. She is the leader of the famous Narmada Bachao Andolan. She has led a social movement consisting of adivasis, farmers, social activists, environmentalists against the construction of Sardar Sarobar dam across the Narmada river in Gujarat. “...The action by Patkar was consistent with the dominant thrust of the environmental movement in India, which powerfully foregrounds questions of production and distribution within human society” (Guha 2010, 86). Mahasweta Devi who is a writer as well as an activist addresses the issue of land rights of indigenous people. Another

activist cum writer of international repute Arundhati Roy has been taking an active part in the Narmada Bachao Andolan. She was a vocal of India's nuclear tests.

In more recent years another influential name that has come to the forefront is C.K. Janu. She is from an adivasi family of Kerela who fights for the greater cause of indigenous rights for land. In the year 2001 C.K. Janu launched a protest movement which propelled a tribal movement for their land right to the fore front in the political discourse of Kerela. Here is an excerpt from a newspaper article published in a leading national daily:

Janu evades questions about her personal hardships following the incidents at Muthanga. "My personal experiences have no relevance as they are part of a cause that highlighted the collective dispossession and deprivation of the hapless Adivasis," She says. She promises to continue the struggle to get more land for the landless Adivasis and to protect the land that has already been assigned. (Nazeer 2011).

Her movement was to protest the agreement between the adivasis and the state government to provide 500 acres of land to each adivasi family. She has been often regarded as the first organic adivasi woman activist in Kerela. Her movement of protest opened up a new dimension of subaltern identity politics which seeks to achieve social justice as well as ecological balance.

It can be assumed from the above that the tradition of ecofeminism has a strong tradition in the Indian subcontinent. Woman activism for the greater cause of environment is the striking feature of ecofeminist movement in India.

### **5.5 Assam in the Ecofeminist Perspective**

Assam possesses certain unique characteristics in terms of racial as well as biological diversity. It is a homeland of people from different castes, communities, races and religion. Assam has been often distinguished from the rest of India by its distinctive geographical location. Its uniqueness is also reflected both in terms of its cultural as well as biological diversity. The position of a woman is defined by the socio-economic structure of a society as well as the

structure of gender relation within the group. There is difference in the position of woman among different communities. Agriculture or agro-based business is treated as the main occupation of a large number of people and this has shaped the gendered division of work. “North eastern women are not a homogenous group; their mobility, visibility and economic role differ as between the elite and poor, from state to state and tribe to tribe, but there are some commonalities. In the past, a wife/ mother’s opinion was esteemed even if she had no property rights” (quoted in Krishna 2001, 318). According to recent studies the status of women in Assam presents a complex paradox. A large number of people in the region still subscribe to age old belief systems. Women’s lives are riddled with difficulties because of age old traditions, superstitious beliefs, and witch hunts. In recent times witch hunting has snatched the lives of many people from the marginalized sections.

Thus the construction of Assam in the context of the Indian nation is rather negative – it is regarded as ‘the problem state’, the ‘underdeveloped’ part of India. Another stream of discourse emanate from this: this is the discourse of the chauvinist nationalists who believe that the Indian nation state treats their land as ‘other’. This has become the root cause of different sub-nationalist struggles through the recent history of the region. Adoption of the *Look East Policy* by the Indian government to uplift Assam’s sub-nationality has created different discourses in the academic and popular parlance.

The language of reform as well as development regarding the state is mostly of a gendered nature. Different policies and rules adopted by the government are deeply embedded in the process of making individuals governable. Different governmental policies of recent years are designed with the goal of attaining human development; however, these have initiated newer forms of domestication for women. Their roles are limited to the four walls of home. These vision plans of the government are nothing but a renewed form of patriarchy. The names of such schemes are Janani Suraksha Yojna, Majoni Scheme, National Bowari Scheme, Baideo and Nabou Sceme, Janani Sishu Suraksha Karyakram etc. Both man and woman used to take active part in the various historical events of the times. But the point is that the voices of the subalterns have never been

considered. In Assam the *middle class* dominates in every sphere. In recent years various secessionist movements of the region have originated for the cause of ecological deprivation. They feel that the central government has exploited the region's rich oil, timber, water and different natural resources for their own benefit. The resource sharing is the root cause of those movements.

Apart from this, the relationship between women and environment is indeed an important aspect to look at in the context of Assam. The women of this region have their own understanding about ecology. Their knowledge about ecology or the natural ecosystem is reflected in their participation in various activities. These activities define the multidimensional relationship between women and environment. In this context Vandana Shiva's words are worth mentioning: "Ecological ways of knowing nature are necessarily participatory. Nature herself is the experiment and women, as sylviculturalists, agriculturalists and water resource managers, the traditional natural scientists. Their knowledge is ecological and plural, reflecting both the diversity of natural ecosystems and the diversity in cultures that nature-based living gives rise to" (Shiva 1988,40). The significant point is that unlike the pan-Indian environmental movements, the case of Assam is different. Assam has never had a strong tradition of ecofeminist movement. The fact that has been glossed over is that women's voices are essential to analyze various environmental issues. The politics of resource control and ethnicity have been closely interwoven. In Assam and some other states the middle class has effectively used this lever in the regional and autonomy movements. Women's interest and motivation is evident in the crucial role that they have played in the various struggles for greater autonomy vis-à-vis the central government, as in the Assam and Nagaland movements. But this has not enhanced women's decision-making power in the public or political sphere" (Misra and Misra, 1995, Krishna 2001, 310).

There is a vast difference between the women living in the urban setting and the women living in the rural setting. The women in rural households have direct access to the environment. They depend on nature/environment for their everyday personal use. They possess knowledge about nutritional and medicinal properties of particular food items as well as of various roots, plants and trees. The popular

perception is that the women belonging to the indigenous groups enjoy the same status as man. The position of a woman in Assam is believed to be relatively better than in other states of India. But very often this egalitarian status is a myth. Women play a stereotypical role both in the public and private domain. They enjoy the full freedom to take active part in each and every activity and this in itself is a paradox. The following case studies will give us the picture of gender/environment relationship in the context of Assam. It also helps us to examine the relevance of ecofeminist argument in this context.

### **5.6 Narratives from the field**

**Case Study 1:** “At one time I regularly went for fishing. Whenever I got fish, I used to sell it in the nearby villages. My husband also did the same thing. But now I have become old and do not go for fishing.” – These were the words of a woman from a Scheduled Caste community of Biswanath. When the researcher came across her she told that through fishing she tried to meet their (whole family) daily expenses. She again told that the people of the whole area depended on the river (Brahmaputra). She added, “Once upon a time there was a lot more fish in the river than what we find these days. Now a days the livelihood practices are changing.” Quite obviously the lady in question depended on the river for economic security.

**Case Study 2:** I carried out another field study in a village of Lakhimpur district. This village is situated on the banks of the river Subansiri. Significantly the construction of a big dam is going on there. People from different communities have been living there. The people of this village have their paddy fields on the bank of the river. They used to cultivate a variety of crops. They are very much dependent on the Subansiri River. Women join hands with their husbands in agriculture. Thus, women have a good deal of knowledge about crops. Floods and erosion have affected their livelihood. In recent years these problems have become serious and have adverse effects. “We are poor people. Agriculture is the main occupation of my husband. I used to take active part in agricultural activities as my family depends on agriculture. I have sufficient amount of knowledge regarding some crops. Many times the seasonal flood has washed

away our crops. But we cannot think of life without this river” (Lakhima Das/35 yrs). She does not go to the market to sell the products. She only manages the household. Her husband used to sell the crops in the market. This is a (Ghagar Kalakhowa) woman from a village in the Lakhimpur district, Assam. She used to go to the paddy field regularly. She does not have any knowledge about recent environmental movements.

**Case Study 3:** “Both men and women face a lot of hardship at the time of disasters. But we, the women, have to face many difficulties due to lack of sanitary facilities. At the time of flood water is everywhere. But there is no water to drink. We have to collect drinking water for the entire family. I can do everything, weaving, cooking, and fishing.” (Tarakanti Doley/55 yrs). This is the story of a woman belong to the Mishing community of Matmora area of Dhakuakhana. Matmora entered the public discourse in a big way due to the devastating flood of recent years. The people of different castes, classes and communities are residing in this area. The consecutive floods have posed a serious threat to their survival. Many have shifted to other places. Many of them are still there. They have settled on the embankment where there is sand cover everywhere. The post disaster period is terrible. “Disasters- whether predictable or unpredictable, natural or socially constructed-do not affect people indiscriminately. Pre-existing vulnerabilities reveal themselves and submit persons to heightened impact depending on geography (for example, if the setting is near a river, coast or fault line), age (for example, children and the elderly) and socio- economic status”(Juran 2012,3). Women in comparison to men are more affected by disasters. “In many ways, women’s vulnerabilities in coping with disasters are a hand that has been dealt long before the disaster strikes: the fatal exposure of women to death and loss in disasters has been socially constructed and set in place by male- dominated societies that have established the general inequality of women throughout the globe...” (Juran, 2012, 3).

**Case Study 4:** A field study was conducted in a Karbi village of Biswanath of Sonitpur. All the ethnic groups of Assam are directly dependent on nature. Many research works have highlighted the nature-loving characteristic of the Karbis. They depend on forests for everyday household use: food, fuel, fodder, fiber,



timber, bamboo, medicinal herbs, spices etc are all taken from nature. The dwellers of this area depend on the nearby forests for these items. Women are busy in household business. They have direct connection with the environment. They collect necessary herbs from the nearby forest which they sell in the market. "I used to collect herbs from the nearby forest for preparing rice beer. Actually I have a good knowledge about the herbs which are needed to prepare rice beer."(Maneswari Teron Pi/ 80 yrs.) These are the words of a woman from the Karbi community of Biswanath. "The herbs are no longer abundantly available like earlier times," she goes on to add. They used to rear different varieties of silk worm. She told that now a days this practice is not very popular. When I asked her about the conservation and preservation of the forest, she revealed her ignorance about these issues. She is also an expert in weaving. She used to make her cloth of daily need carrying the stamp of her ethnic community.

**Case Study 5:**"I am working in a tea garden. It's a small tea garden. I have been working here since the time this garden was set up. I know something about plantation of tea. I always go for plucking. I also perform all household chores. After doing my job in the garden, every day I go to the nearby forest and collect firewood. My husband is in another business. Large part of my earnings is spent on the survival of the household. He used to spend his entire earning in liquor," (Munu Hari/ 45 Yrs) a woman from the tea garden labour community of Biswanath said. It is clear that she is a victim of gender oppression. Another question I asked her was about the use of pesticides in the tea garden. But she does not have any knowledge about the effect of those pesticides as health hazard. She uttered names of some pesticides and said that she uses these regularly. She told that these medicines are very important for the growth of the tea plant. Otherwise certain insects destroy the plants. In spite of having economic independence and working knowledge about the tea plantation she has to overcome many difficulties.

The above narratives are a part of my field experiences during the course of my research. The study is informed by the belief that women's relationship with the environment is largely influenced by hard material realities. The experiences of the field helped me to make the point that women follow a "traditional" way of

doing things. They seem to be aware of the particular environmental problem but their perceptions are different. The position of a woman in the household or in the society is determined by different power relations. These case studies address the material condition of women lives. It shows the women's practical and material needs. These case studies also give an idea about how the environmental condition of society has its impact on women's lives.

The study shows that the relationship between women and environment support the epistemological claim of the ecofeminists. The relationship between women and environment in Assam is participatory. Primarily women are regarded as caregivers. Their participation in the food chain has developed their nurturing relationship with the environment. They are the household managers. Vandana Shiva has illustrated this point when she talks about the women and environment relationship. She argues "women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically, but also through their social role in providing sustenance" (Shiva 1988, 41). This has developed a special kind of relationship between women and environment. The above narratives reveal that women actively participate in producing and reproducing life. Their participation in the food chain is significant. The preparation and consumption of food defines the social role of women. In this context women and nature can both be identified as the producers of life. "From the perspective of Third World women, productivity is a measure of producing life and sustenance; that this kind of productivity has been rendered invisible does not reduce its centrality to survival- it merely reflects the domination of modern patriarchal economic categories which see only profits, not life" (Shiva, 1988,4). Women are the first to suffer at the time of distress. When there is any kind of imbalance in their life circle they are victimized. Unlike the Chipko Movement, women of this region have not been active participants in environmental movements. But their dependence on environment is a reality. Unlike communities in other parts of India who rely on the forest for their survival, the people of this region are not forest dwellers. But they depend on nature for their survival. It is clear from the narratives collected from the field that they depend on nature for their survival. It helps them to lead their peasant economy for their daily sustenance. Environmental degradation disrupts their life

as their peaceful coexistence with the environment is disrupted. They are struggling against the impact of climate change. The changing ecology has changed the landscape of their lives.

The ecofeminist argument in this chapter mainly examines the ideas of the leading ecofeminist from India, Vandana Shiva. But the significant point is that the theory of women- nature dualism offered by her is very often contradictory to the women- nature relationship in Assam. The women of this region depend on the environment only for their daily needs. They depend on the environment as a support system not only for themselves but also for their families. They have developed a caring, nurturing relationship with the environment. Though they used to take active part in agricultural farms their contribution is counted mainly on the basis of their household activities. Women, here as elsewhere, do not possess any land of their own.

“In this conceptualization, therefore, the link between women and the environment can be seen as structured by a given gender and class (caste/race) organization of production, reproduction and distribution. Ideological constructions such as of gender, of nature, and of the relationship between the two, may be seen as (interactively) a part of this structuring but not the whole of it” (Agarwal 2007, 324). The ‘class-gender’ effect is a useful one in examining the relationship between women and environment. The interviewed women cited above depict the real picture of the class- gender effect. These women have led their lives providing sustenance in respect of food, fuel and minimum household business. The pre-determined gendered division of labour in the society has defined their role in different phases of family sustenance. In the time of distress they suffer a lot. The issue of survival of the family is quite crucial for a woman living in the rural setting. Their awareness about modern environmentalism is also a crucial matter while studying the relationship between women and environment. They used to perform their duty as ‘caregiver’ only for their own family. They are obliged to carry the major burden of environmental degradation in terms of their family’s concern. “[Women] acquire a special knowledge of species varieties and the processes of natural regeneration.....They could thus be

seen as both victims of the destruction of nature and as repositories of knowledge about nature, in ways distinct from the men of their classes” (Agarwal 2007,324).

The above arguments support the cause of women who are from the grassroots. In contrast to this, the perspective of elite women towards environmental degradation is different. They are not using the environment for their daily sustenance. If one considers the history of environmental activism in Assam, it is possible to understand the middle class involvement in it. ‘Concern for nature’, ‘concern for wildernesses,’ ‘various conservation oriented approaches’ are the basic features of this activism. In recent years the dam movement has brought to the fore issues of ecology, water, and ecological crisis. It is thus important to look at environmental issues from the class and gender perspectives.