

# Ecology and Women

## Introduction

Is not ecology the common interest of both men and women? Then why should we relate it particularly to women? In modern social thinking it is so connected to women that there is a new field of knowledge emerging under the name eco-feminism. Why?

In recent years feminism and ecology are the two most powerful movements for social change. They both are like twins and stand for similar values of mutual respect and peaceful co-existence. Both the movements strongly denounce the patriarchal values of domination and manipulation as the basic model of relationship in the world. Domination exercised ruthlessly in a blind self-centered way is alienating the eco-sphere from the human family. Women who stand for connected-ness and relationships strongly resent it and campaign against it.

## Myths related to Ecology and Women

### The Greek Myth of Persephone

The Greek mythology gives us the story of the abduction of Persephone by Hades. Persephone is the daughter of Demeter the goddess of vegetation, especially, the prosperity of the farms. Hades is the lord of wealth and the king of the nether world. When Hades saw Persephone so full of life, joy and surrounded by nature, he wanted her for himself. Without speaking with her and finding out her feelings towards him, he went to Zeus, her father. Zeus knew very well that neither the girl nor her mother Demeter, would like such an alliance. But still he promised to help him. The fact that she was his own daughter did not mean any thing to him because he wanted wealth and to have it the lord of wealth had to be humoured. Zeus knew that if

Persephone was abducted, the fields would not yield. But still he helped Hades because of his greed for wealth.

What Zeus and Hades did was a crime against women and insult to nature. The two men plotting to get what they wanted totally ignoring the feelings of both the mother and the daughter is criminal. Putting the exuberance of nature's life and beauty behind material wealth is an insult to nature. Towards the end of the story a contract was made according to which Persephone had to stay for four months with Hades every year. These four months are the bleakest months for her and nature mourns with her giving the earth the four lifeless winter months. In Hades (the name of the underworld) Persephone is rightly described as the queen of the dead and goddess of wealth whereas on earth she is the very symbol of life and joy.

Myths are human intuitions into reality expressed in symbolic language. In this myth violence against women is inextricably connected to violence against nature, both perpetrated by the lust and greed for wealth on the part of men. Like Persephone women are harassed and their lives are made perpetual winter by lustful and greedy men, who are dead to finer feelings of life. They imbibe as they grow up the patriarchal values of domination and manipulation as the mode of relating to others.

### **The Indian Myth of Sita**

In Ramayana, the heroine Sita is found in the furrow when king Janaka ploughs the field in a ritual. Her very name Sita in Sanskrit means a 'furrow', 'a furrowed land' or 'a ploughed field'. Andal was also found under a *tulsi* plant. They are considered to be incarnations of Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu. The human incarnations of Vishnu are always born while the incarnations of Lakshmi are always 'found'. It makes one wonder if the female babies were abandoned even in those days in societies that were highly misogynic?

Because Sita was found in the earth, the earth is considered to be her mother. Like her mother earth, she is famous for patience in the face of repeated abuse. She was abducted by a man who for fear of touching her, carried her with the earth on which she was standing. But this did not mean anything to her male chauvinistic husband who asked her to go through fire to establish her chastity. Later after return to Ayodhya one citizen in the privacy of his home, spoke derogatively of Rama's acceptance of his wife who stayed in another man's house. On the strength of this opinion Rama sent her to the forest though at that time she was pregnant. There was not a single citizen in the vast Ramraj to speak disparagingly of Rama for this cruelty to his wife. No one raised the question even privately as to how this king who could not even take care of his pregnant wife could care for the people in the kingdom. Such questions are outside the purview of the chauvinistic male mind. When later she was brought to the court by the rishi Valmiki and he attested to her chastity, Rama asked her to go through fire once again to prove her fidelity to him. This proved to be one humiliation too many. Sita's patience snapped. She asked her mother to take her to herself. The earth opened and took in Sita. This is not the story of an ordinary woman but a queen and more than that a divine incarnation. People in India are still using this myth to teach young girls the need to be faithful to one's husband whatever he might do to them. In every house when a girl gets married and is about to leave the family to go with her husband, the inevitable and repeated advice is that she should be patient as the mother earth. This is the teaching power of the myth. For a woman, her parental home is her real home. Her in-laws and at times even the husband consider her as an outsider and send her back to her mother if she does not please them.

### **The Eco-consciousness in ancient India**

In ancient India, before the Aryan settlers, women enjoyed considerable freedom and commanded respect. Then they had the custom of offering puja to the earth before ploughing, digging a well or any action which they thought might 'hurt' mother earth. The dancers paid respect to the earth before they started dancing. The tree was propitiated before it was cut. There was an over-all sensitivity to nature. Every temple preserved medicinal trees and plants in the little garden attached to the temple and it was considered a great honour to work in order to keep up the temple garden. The tree proper to the place was even worshipped as *thala virutcham* and the temple was built around it. The big trees in the villages were considered sacred and as such preserved either by placing the statues of gods in their shade or as seat of justice for *panchayat* (court of the people). All living beings were looked on as sacred, each manifesting the glory of God in its own way. In fact, for ancient India the cosmos, penetrated with the presence of God and manifesting the divine glory was the real living temple. Such respectful and reverential attitude towards the earth and all living beings made people enjoy a happy co-existence with God and nature.

### **The Faith of Israel**

The Yahwist theologian believes that God entrusted the earth to the human beings and asked them to "till it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). They had to maintain the living beings which would provide them with the food. The first human being was called Adam after the earth (*adama*) from which he was taken. Even the future status of the first couple depended on the trees that provided fruits for them. Later when they sinned, the earth was cursed on account of them. At the time of Noah, because of the sins of the people, the whole nature was destroyed along with human beings. God's blessings were associated with the fruits of the earth

and the fruit of the womb. Similarly the barrenness of the earth and of the womb were considered to be God's punishment. Human life was experienced as inseparably bound to nature and the responsibility of human beings towards nature was emphasised. In the Song of Songs the beauty of the girl loved by Yahweh is described in terms of prosperity of nature.

Israel's prayer and rituals were rooted in God who manifested divinity through nature and history. So some of the psalms are beautiful meditations on nature and history. The various symbols and names for Yahweh such as the living water, the rock, the farmer who plants the vine which is Israel, the shepherd of Israel etc., speak volumes about the eco-consciousness of Israel in its relationship with God. Israel's piety had another dimension too. Through meditation on nature they had deep communion with the divine feminine, Yahweh's *shekina* (Yahweh's presence conceptualised as a woman).

### **The Tamil culture**

Among the Tamil people, the success of human life was considered in terms of the whole created reality. Every hill has a temple on top and that assured the preservation of life on the hill. Spring festivals are celebrated showering flowers on goddesses. All through the spring and summer months, the temples of mother goddesses have celebrations one after the other. During these festivals, women, mother goddess and nature celebrated their intimacy among themselves. Days before the festival women prepare young tender saplings of food grains (*mulai pari*) in a decorative array. On the day of the festival, they carry these on head to the temple of the mother goddess. On the way in several places, they place these down, form a circle around and dance with rhythmic steps, clapping of hands and joyful songs (*kummi*). On a few occasions like these, we can still see traces of that ancient Tamil culture that respected nature and women.

The rivers that feed the fields and human beings and cattle are all seen as expressions of the goddess and the symbol of divine grace that nurtures the human person. On the day the planting season begins, respect and reverence are shown to the rivers. Women offer flowers to the river and pray for the well being of the cosmos and their own family. Men express the joy of the day gambolling in the river enjoying the playful rush of the waters from the dams. An observer can intuitively feel the interconnectedness of the divine, human and nature.

Another expression of such interconnectedness is the harvest festival (*pongal*) officiated by women. At sunrise, women boil milk and allow it to bubble up and overflow to their joyful *kulavai* (a musical sound made by women on joyful occasions). New rice is boiled with milk, jaggery, ghee and coconut and this sweet rice is fed to the animals that worked in the fields, and then shared among themselves with their relatives and those who worked for them in the fields. Though the Aryan settlers introduced their gods Indra and Varuna into the festival, on the whole, the Tamilians do not treat them as gods but simply as the sun and rain that have co-operated with them in cultivation. Women are the officiating priests of this festival and men express their courage and bravery by controlling bulls that are let loose. In Tamil culture, religion is lived mostly in the family and many of the rituals of life are officiated by women.

### **The Western Tradition**

Historically the western tradition is patriarchal and androcentric. Notwithstanding the heroic charity of individuals and groups due to the influence of Christianity, the general mode in human relationship is domination and manipulation. Among human beings who are equal, an artificial hierarchy is built up to bring about inequality. Then to preserve one's own position at the apex, ideologies are

invented to justify the hierarchy of unequals and even to say that it is a divine institution. Such manipulation and rationalisation are fundamental in all patriarchal societies. In India the Aryans brought patriarchy with them and built their society on oppression of women and caste system. They manipulated the people of the soil to imbibe these two practices. They wrote scriptures to justify the injustice in their system. The Jewish society of the biblical times was patriarchal and the Old Testament is a witness to the non-personal status of Jewish women in those days. According to the Yahwist theologian, the divine command to the first human pair was to till the earth and keep it (Gen. 2:15). But after a few centuries, the priestly writer changed the command and the first man and woman were asked to dominate the earth (Gen 1:28). It looks as though the West took it quite seriously and built its civilization on this command to subdue or dominate - man subjugating woman, the Whites dominating the other races, the human beings subduing nature and so it went on. Domination has become acute in two spheres - violence against women and violence against nature. At the basis of both is the fact that with growing technology, the sense of the sacred is being lost.

### **Development or Destruction**

The rich cultivable soil is getting slowly poisoned by the spreading of unprocessed industrial waste. The once fertile land is now becoming useless to grow any vegetation. The sea is turned into a dumping ground for atomic waste and a place for testing lethal nuclear weapons. The earth is denuded of the rain forests, leading to global warming. Even the space above is not left free. In a few years time we will need some monitoring control in space regulating the traffic of the thousands of human-made satellites in order to avoid big clashes and fireworks up in the sky. Clean air and water are becoming rare commodities. Once flowers were strewn into the rivers in gratitude for their life sustaining waters. Now all the industrial wastes are

drained into the rivers making them agents of death. The ponds that once saved rain water and made the springs alive throughout the year, are now the victims of real estate people and 'developers'. After flattening out the ponds, bore-wells are drilled deep and from the veins of mother earth they suck up her life fluids. Water from the deep bores, the wealth of the mines, petrol and such non-renewable wealth are mercilessly torn away from the womb of the earth. How long will she be patient, looking on silently at the vandalism of her children? The culture of domination forgets that such violence is like a boomerang. If nature is destroyed, this in turn will destroy human beings.

### **Women in our "use and throw culture"**

Industrial development has brought on the "use and throw culture" resulting in more garbage than we can handle. This "use and throw culture" is extended to man-woman relationship resulting in fast expanding red-light areas all over, the call-girls and women who work in night clubs, the various pleasure games that are used to attract tourism. Such places cry out the cruelty of man towards woman. After the dowry is used up, the wife is thrown off, sometimes even from life. But just as violence against nature rebounds on human beings, oppression of women has negative repercussions on men. A beaten woman can never be a joyful partner and the happiness and the enrichment that can come to a man through intimacy with a woman who is an equal to him is an unknown experience for many men. Moreover instead of joyful living together, life becomes a warfare because no intelligent and dignified woman will be subject to domination for long.

### **Women and nature - Partners in distress**

Industrialization affects nature and women alike. The negative effects of our technological growth have been already discussed in the previous paragraphs. With the

highly sophisticated machines the sense of achievement soars up in man to unlimited heights. It acts like a heady wine and he begins to use any one and anything as something to be used for his own achievement. Just as nature is exploited for one's own selfish greed, so woman is also exploited. She is exploited economically by paying less for more hours of work. She is made into an object in sexual exploitation to develop one's business interests. She is already a passive receiver and a dependent infant in religion; denied presence in androcentric thought and language and has social status either of her father or her husband as is seen by the practice of taking on the husband's family name at the time of marriage. Our development instead of liberating women from this slavery is making capital use of the already existing oppressive conditions.

Poor women's plight is more. When human labour force is reduced because of machines, it is mostly women who lose their jobs. In jobs involving health risk, for example, leather industry, more women are employed. Deforestation makes women's life miserable in poor households because they are deprived of firewood which formerly was collected from the nearby woods. When water sources dry up, they are forced to walk miles to get water. If the tribal women in the Chipco movement and those in the Narmada valley are fighting for their forest and land, it is only a desperate attempt to save what is necessary for their survival. Ecology for them is not a luxurious past time to show themselves more erudite or to float their philanthropic interests. The onslaught on the environment is closely linked not only to the economic and political oppression but also to the gender injustice.

### **Paradigm shift - an urgent need**

To restore eco-and gender justice, society needs a radical paradigm shift. The western values of competition, domination and manipulation should be totally abandoned

and a holistic vision of reality with mutual respect and peaceful co-existence must be inculcated and practised. The patriarchal mindset should be reframed into a gender-balanced and inclusive thinking pattern. We must learn to respect plants and animals who are our seniors in the planet by millions of years. We should learn to acknowledge with respect that they inhabited the earth aeons before the human beings made their appearance on the face of the earth. If the human family continues to exist, it is due to the faithful service of every being in nature. As part of the created reality, we should attune ourselves to vibrate in unison with the cosmos and not turn against it. Men should learn to look on women as their equals. It is very sad to see that women all over the world have to struggle so hard for equality which is their birth right. Consciousness of our interdependence and equal partnership will pave the way to just relationships.

### **The Christian Response**

The Church needs a radical "metanoia" and should restructure its theology, spirituality and worship in the light of Jesus' movement, taking in the history of women and the earth into its mainstream theological, spiritual and liturgical reflection. Manipulative theology justifying domination will only help to make the Church unchristian.

Power is a positive quality that is needed for self-determination. The power of the Risen Lord is an empowering power and not a dominating, manipulating and enslaving power. So the proper Christian response to the global situation today is that filled with the spirit of the Risen Lord, we empower all those voiceless and powerless people, specially women from whom the power for self-determination is taken away by the patriarchally conditioned society.

Science in every field is very good because it helps us to understand nature better. But technology should be used with discernment, guided by human values and it should

promote ethical behaviour and cosmic well being. Trading nobility of human life for technological growth is backsliding in civilisation.

As intelligent beings who are invested with responsibility, people should turn away from consumerism with the corrosion of values it entails and learn to conserve nature, appreciating the sacredness of life. This calls for the practice of asceticism in reducing one's needs and enlarging one's vision. Through sharing and mutual give and take, everyone's needs must be fulfilled. But greed in any form is unworthy of human beings called to be children of God.

We are followers of Christ whose divinity was recognised even by a stranger, when he died on the cross. Christ shows through his example that one's greatness is not in having much or enjoying more pleasures but in the nobility of values that inspires one's life.

The life of Jesus was intimately connected with nature. The star proclaimed his advent. Jordan revealed to him his divine identity. The desert with its mysteries strengthened him for his mission. His wisdom and teaching were very much rooted in nature. In the free birds he saw Divine Providence and in the wayside flowers the Divine aesthetics. The seeds, the trees and the plants growing in the field were for him the symbols of the reign of God. Water was for him the symbol of the Spirit, the gift to God's people. Nature was with him in his suffering and mourned his death.

Along with the support and sympathy of nature, Jesus' life was enriched by the nearness of a woman - his mother. From her he received unconditional, deep, psychological and spiritual intimacy, empathy and the freedom to grow as an individual in his own right by choosing his ways and following his mission. Christ allowed himself to be affected and influenced by the love of other men and women

and their joys and sorrows. His contact with the others was always affirming and liberative. There was only one thing in which he was immovable and that is his liberative thrust born of his fidelity to the divine will.

Such is the new paradigm set before us by God. Fostering communion with nature, respecting the dignity and freedom of women, Christians should be guided by the vision of Christ for the world. Humanity has come to a critical point in which we either live together, taking care of each other or we destroy ourselves.

### **Conclusion**

Elizabeth Barrett Browning in a gem of a poem captures a woman's appreciation of nature:

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
and every common bush  
afire with God;  
and only he who sees  
takes off his shoes.  
The rest sit round it  
and pluck blackberries.

In our present day mechanised world people are losing the joyful experience of the human spirit soaring high in mystical contemplation of nature. The present situation is that the humans do not even sit around and pluck blackberries because the bush is there no more. Let us join women the world over and men of good will too, in working together to heal the deep gashes in the body of our mother earth. Let us save the life of nature and save humanity.

"In silent wonder the wise see God  
as the life flaming in all creation.

This is the greatest seer of Brahman (God)..."

Mundaka Upanishad,

**Sr. Corona Mary, O.S.M.**