

ECO-FEMINIST QUEST: AN INDIAN APPRAISAL

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I Introduction

Ours is an age of exciting and challenging opportunities in areas of globalization, information, sustainability, ecology etc. For women this opportunity is multiplied because of the close connections and implications each of them have with our lives. Have we been adequately exposed to this context which affects our lives as well as the future of our generation? In this paper an attempt is made to understand the principle of eco-feminism and the value it holds for the promotion of sustainable development. Itwari Devi, the leader of the Chipko women of the Gharwal spoke that the strength of women comes from the forests where the power of nature "Shakti" resides. When women drink from the clean streams, take food grown in the forest and breathe the fresh air that blows through the trees they experience the power of nature within themselves. This power cannot be destroyed by any inhuman intervention. Women stand in their very right to claim their position.

Nature is mother in abundance. With no permission from nature modern man feels the right to everything in it as if it were his possession and treats it as his property. This is very much in contradiction with the world view of the people who live close to nature, close enough to feel the pulse of the plant and the ebb and flow of life in the sap of the tree. Today humanity is moving towards the edge of a deteriorating mentality in its concern for nature. There are abundant signals that call forth awareness and

action to protect and promote the natural resources – clean rivers, fresh air, humanitarian sharing of the space that ensures dignity and respect to persons, protected soil with vegetation and green cover, free from the threat of nuclear disaster and protection of the ozone layer, reducing the threat of global warming and the like. Humanity needs to learn to live with contentment, without greed.

Ecological concerns arise from the realization that the interconnectedness in the natural order is a fact of reality. Nature cannot be perceived in parts but be taken in its totality as a holistic system. The word 'Eco' means the 'household' where all those who exist have an equal status and a sense of belonging. Ecology refers to the study of organisms and their 'home' environment. The 'earth' is the habitat or the home where all beings find the connection and the root of where they belong. It sharpens our understanding of the natural order and its inherent value of interconnectedness and non-hierarchical existence in an unbroken relationship of mutuality.

Given this fact it is time for humanity to take necessary steps in creating right awareness in reading the context of our times with its challenges concerning ecology which is intimately linked to the concerns of women. Feminism is an ideology and action paradigm for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. That women have become aware of their experience of subordination, while being conscious that they are in fact the sustainers of life, is the starting point of feminist consciousness. Developing this consciousness creates a critical awareness on the role of patriarchy in the lives of women and examines the cultural moorings that legitimize and stand support to the practice of the women's subservience. When women come together and share such experience of subordination and their action to overcome them, it actualizes the ideology of Feminism. Sharing this concern with many like-minded men and women creates the possibility of strengthening the support groups for the emancipation of women. Such solidarity is required to stand up for the cause of women's equality and for establishing their dignity.

Another important feature of feminism is that it relieves women of their attitude of fatalism and the myth that their state of subordination is willed by God or by any transcendent reality. This liberation in fact enables women to understand the mechanisms of

religion and culture that kept women in bondage. On the contrary women are awakened to the revelation of God in their own lives. Thus women begin to develop a perspective of their own in understanding the intervention and action of God in society and in their personal lives. This experience develops in women a search for their own roots within scripture, culture, and social relationships and in politics which determines and controls the economy of the society. In other words, women become suspicious of the structures of society in which are embedded the roots of women's inequality. Thus the basic belief of feminism is that women's equality can be ensured only if it is built and is based on the transformation of the structures of society.

This analysis is a key factor in developing a feminist perspective. Often critically thinking women are dubbed as over-doers, rebels and fetishes. Such judgments arise from the reality of ignorance. Analysis is the tool that helps us grasp the functioning of society. Those who do not wish to take the trouble to critically analyse society and identify the root cause of the problem are the intellectually lazy and ignorant who dub women's issue as unimportant and relegate women to the background. Such an attitude and action supports the stand of the oppressors who have used religion, law and the organizational systems of society for their own benefit. This attitude tends to perpetuate patriarchy and hardens the structural sin of sexism.

On the contrary the awakened persons see the pattern and practice of injustice not only for women but also for all the marginalised sections of society and the marginalisation of nature. It is in this sense that women and the ecological system have a common ground of existence and a common destiny. It gives us a new ground to exist and affirm our oneness and the interconnectedness that exists among us. Nature enhances human beings in every way beginning with physical sustainability to economic, cultural and spiritual sustainability.

Françoise d'Eanbonne the one who coined the word "Eco-feminism" in 1974 gives the following opinion:

The thesis on 'Eco-Feminism: Revolution or Mutation?' established that the immediate cause of present-day woes and future threats is the patriarchal system, founded upon the appropriation of procreation and fertility and the mental and

cultural structures of which have persisted across all successive social and economic domains.

The two principal factors in the rapid expansion of **patriarchy, exhaustion of resources and global population growth**, are the distant yet direct causes of the present-day ecological catastrophe. The battle of the sexes merely reflects man's battle against himself, which in the past, and still today, translates to the battle of the classes. The failure of socialist revolutions comes from their economic failure and refusal to consider anything other than the "battle of the classes" without examining the foundations of hierarchy and human exploitation – **sexism**.

Capital, now in the imperialist stage, will only disappear with an ecological solution of production (and of consumption) which will constitute the only possible elimination of the outdated structures of **dominance, aggressiveness, competitiveness and absolutism** in order to replace them with those of **cooperation and equality between individuals** (thus between sexes), **and of the species with the environment.**¹

Eco-feminism is a combination of concerns expressed by the Feminist Movements, Peace Movements and Ecological Movements. Eco-feminism is thus based on the principle of caring for the other which includes both human and the non-human. It is primarily based on the principle of equality of status of all beings. It recognizes that only in a respectful acknowledgment of every being we recognize our true self in relation to the partnership we have with nature. It affirms the capacity of women to effect changes in the unethical structures of society.

II Sustainable Development

The principle of Eco-feminism is based on the principle of Sustainable Development. Our common future depends on the common vision we evolve together in the care and sustainability of the earth. Bio-diversity, biological links of the human and animal

¹ Taken from Eanbonne's article "What could an Eco-Feminist Society be?" from *Liberty, Equality and Women? Anthology*, Harmattan, 1990.

world are inevitable questions we need to face with urgency. The concern for the living being on this planet is the ultimate one which human beings need to nurture. Biotechnology is the technology of the future. It will have a pervasive impact on all the areas of our life.

Our belonging to the earth is immediately linked to our responsibility towards the resources of the earth. Today we talk about social fencing for protection of the forests and trees. It demands that ultimately it is people who are responsible in caring for the earth. In doing so wo/men² claim that the responsibility for the regeneration of the ecosystem rests in the hands of human beings. Creating laws for the protection of the eco-system and storing them in bookshelves alone is not helpful to the poor. In order to make this become a reality it is necessary that people claim responsibility. Only people's self-determination can create the climate of actualizing the legal demands. In this process we need to look into the pattern of development promoted in our country under neo-liberal globalisation.

"The environmental hazards faced by developing countries are numerous. Key threats include the continuous degradation of cultivated lands; desertification in arid and semi-arid zones, tropical deforestation, severe squalor and pollution in large cities; and the release of noxious gases and the discharge of untreated industrial effluents. With continued population growth in the South and rising levels of wealth and consumption, further pressures on the environment are inevitable."³

Arundhati Roy in her book *The Greater Common Good* states "Dam-building grew to be equated with nation building... Not only did they build new dams and new irrigation systems, they took control of small, traditional systems that had been managed by village communities for thousands of years, and allowed them to atrophy. To compensate the loss Government built more and

² Wo/man: Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza means to include men and women in a single world in an attempt to make an inclusive term. In this paper it is used with the same meaning.

³ *Cooperation South*, UNDP, New York, 2000, p. 19.

more dams.... We have three thousand six hundred dams that qualify as big dams, three thousand three hundred of them built after independence. One thousand more are under construction. Yet, one fifth of our population – 200 million people – does not have safe drinking water and two thirds – 600 million – lack basic sanitation... They're (big dams) are a Government's way of accumulating authority. They're a guaranteed way of taking a farmer's wisdom away from him. They're a brazen means of taking water, land and irrigation away from the poor and gifting it to the rich. Their reservoirs displace populations of people leaving them homeless and destitute. Ecologically too, they're in the doghouse. They lay the earth to waste. They cause floods, water-logging, salinity, they spread disease. There are mounting evidence that links Big Dams to earth quakes."⁴ Facts such as these make one wonder whether the planners have any concern for those who live at the bottom of the society.

"By the end of the year 2025, 83% of the expected global population of 8.5 billion will be living in developing countries. Yet the capacity of available resources and technologies to satisfy the demands of this growing population for food and other agricultural commodities remains uncertain."⁵

The major planners of today proved their inadequacy to give sustainability a chance. The fast depleting and speedy death of resources for the consumption of greedy pleasure lovers is indeed a stark reality. Faced with this situation we are forced to think of alternatives that ensure sustainability. Sustainability refers to the fact that the resources of the earth are meant to be there for future generations as well. Development without this perspective is in danger of depleting the resources of this earth for the greed of the few who would consume and encourage consumerism of the rest of the few of their clan thus paving the way for reinforcing deprivation and poverty for the rest. How can a nation ensure that socially responsible economic development takes place and that

⁴ Arundhati Roy, *The Greater Common Good* (Mumbai: India Book Distributors Ltd., 1999), 8-10.

⁵ *Earth Summit "Agenda 21"* (New York: United Nations, 1992), 144.

there is sufficient protection to the resource base and environment for the benefit of future generations without sustaining nature?

It was in 1962 Rachel Carson the American author, in her book *Silent Spring* alerted the world about the dangers of pesticides' poisoning. In the 1960s it was the Chipko women who alerted India about the threat of the extinction of the forests in the Gharwal region. "Over the years, women have continued to speak out for policies and practices that do not threaten the health and well-being of future generations. They continue to fight for improved living standards and protection of the environment."⁶ This affirmation of the UN is an encouraging testimony for women over the world and for women as the life sustainers. The civilisational change of today has become the challenge of social scientists as well as political leaders. It is time to grapple with and search for viable solutions.

III Globalising the Need for the Human or the Inhuman Greed?

Basic need of consumption has been taken care of by indigenous practices which have been the seed ground of developing cultural uniqueness. It was based on the requirements of the geographical, topographical and climatic conditions of each area. It fulfilled the required need of the region and gave a unique flavour to each culture. Today our cities are flooded with chunk food, and our markets are overflowing with cheap unwanted products from other countries enticing the poor consumers to go for the foreign makes. Clothing, cosmetics, constructions, food habits are all geared to the promotion of monoculture. This practice is based on the pattern of defining nature and its resources purely from a commercial point of view. Mother earth is viewed purely as a matter for exploitation. Gudial Singh Nijar states, "Defining the value of forests in terms only of its source as commercially exploitable timber reduces the value of diversity of life in the forest to the value of a few commercially valuable species, and further to

⁶ "Women and Sustainable Development" Earth Summit +5, U.N. Document, New York 23-27 June 1997.

the value of their dead product. This reductionism is destructive not only of the integrity of the forest but also of forest cultures which tap the forests in its diversity for their food, medicine, fiber and shelter.... In south India, the Sholiga tribe from the Belirangan hills of Karnataka uses 27 different varieties of leafy vegetables and a variety of tubers, leaves, fruits and roots for medicinal purposes. The staple diet of the tribes in Madhya Pradesh of rice and lesser millet is complemented with seeds, grains, roots, rhizomes, leaves and fruit of some 165 trees, shrubs and climbers of the forest."⁷

The above reality of the indigenous wisdom is unable to resist the intrusion of the Multi-National Corporations which are taking over the life process of the people without caring for the already existing knowledge. In Germany the farmers are already on the losing ground, says Maria Mies a noted eco-feminist: "whereas in 1949 there were still 1,647,000 farms on the territory of the then Federal Republic of Germany, the corresponding figure for 1995 was down to 542,800. Over the same period, the number of persons employed in agriculture fell from 3,742,000 to 571,000 with a significant acceleration in the rate of departures between the 1980s and the 1990s."⁸ She goes on to say further that farmlands have increasingly become the object of speculation and failure leads to increasing debt which causes the destruction of the family itself.

This fact has led several farmers in India, Andhra Pradesh in particular to commit suicide in the past few years. This is the direct consequence of the competitive and speculative operation of the present economic structure. The exploitative capitalistic economy does not provide any other alternative than maximise the craze for money and increased greed for consumption.

Resource flow has its relationship to the treatment of poor children particularly of the female children. "The evidence on daughter disfavours in some parts of India and East Asia, accentuated in the context of rapid fertility decline, provides one of the more extreme manifestations of anti-female discrimination at

⁷ Gurdial Singh Nijar, *In Defence of Local Community, Knowledge and Biodiversity* (Penang: Third World Network, 1996), 2.

⁸ Veronica BT & Maria Mies, *The Subsistence Perspective* (Spinifex Press 1988), 84.

the hands of mothers and fathers under great social pressure. Yet the causal explanations are all contested. One argument has been that excess girl child mortality is most severe among propertied households. This is indeed an extreme illustration of how "household" assets in the hands of men may fail to enhance the well-being of women."⁹ Today there is greater awareness on the rights of the girl child and the international support has been on the growing direction positively. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Declaration of the World Summit for children in 1990 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women in 1981 endorsed the right of girls and women to equal opportunities in health, education, and employment. This awareness has its links with care for life which links humans to nature.

Victimising Nature is the manifestation of the culture of destruction. When it touches the inner core it shatters the mountain – the indwelling crux. In damming the river we stop the flow of the spirit into our future, in mining the earth we dig furrows into our conscience, and in polluting the air we pollute our consciousness for solidarity and partnership.

In this practice women and children invariably get marginalised because of their position of dependency and lack of control over resources. The economically poor who are also politically voiceless get socially marginalised in the whole process. The monopolisers tend to create an atmosphere that they are responsible to cater to the physical need of the rich humanity while the poor stand afar and watch in disappointment. The emotions of children and house wives are manipulated through the media and advertisements to heighten the rate of consumption. Media is the proclaimer of the good news for the religion of the Market. Human ingenuity and creativity is being gradually monopolised that no one else need to think further. Everything is being thought about ahead and ready-made solutions are offered even before someone expresses a problem.

⁹ *The Challenge of Eliminating World Poverty*, SDC Publication, Berne, May 2000, p. 107-108.

Here is the moment where the wisdom of the indigenous, the wisdom of women and the wisdom of nature are overthrown. For these are the contributors of life while the money makers are the parasites. They thrive on the earnings of others and create wealth without working. Nature works day and night to feed the rest of creation and women too work without counting, without remuneration and without recognition.

When this parasitic relationship is enforced then variety, creativity and pluralism that emerge from the native communities seem to come to the end of imagination. And so is the life of the lesser people, the pauperised. The present system pauperises the poor further and advances the opportunities of the already powerful. It divides people as rich and poor by its preference for the rich and neglect of the rest.

Funding by Financial Institutions for unviable projects and neglect of the local people's need is an alarming factor particularly with regard to building dams. There is lack of accountability in investment in areas where the poor are the worst victims. International Debt servicing and acceleration of the market economy are constantly germinating this divide. According to UN data on financial flow from a sample of 98 countries between the year 1983 and 1988, a net amount of \$115 billion from debtor countries to the developed countries flowed higher than the total of what the countries received as loans, foreign investments and aids.¹⁰ "Capital Flight" is but another phenomenon which multiplies the impact of marginalisation for the poor in quick succession. When individuals pull out their investment from a country and shift their focus to another, it creates a quick imbalance in the country from where the investment is withdrawn. It results in the retrenchment of workers, reduction of employment and closure of production units. It leads to economic crisis which necessitates the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programme yet further leading to a political crisis. The poorer countries become almost enslaved to the dictates of the debtor country. This is a new

¹⁰ Cf. *Debt a Crisis for Development*, U.N. Department of Public Information 1990, p. 17.

form of bonded labour system and a neo-colonization. Greed in this sense has no boundaries. It is unlimited and inhuman. Speculations, figures and money transactions are counted only as entities. Human beings are not counted as worthwhile.

Eco-feminism poses a challenge to this destructive situation. It questions the inability of the system to care for all its members. It questions the exploitative way in which the manipulators whisk away the wealth of the original owners. Women as sustainers of life are much more concerned with fulfilling the basic needs of the common people rather than appeasing the greed of the few.

This situation holds the key to the understanding of solidarity. Oppression cannot be a lasting reality. It has to be countered by the solidarity of the oppressed. Silence cannot be the response when human rights are violated. Bonding together for ensuring basic needs becomes an urgent concern.

IV Nature as the Expression of the Mother Principle – the Capacity to Unite in spite of Differences

Women and nature are interwoven into each other. Their dependency on each other is an inevitable reality. Women's spirituality, emotional intelligence, sociability and physical well being are intertwined with the ebb and flow of life. Land, forest, river, mountains, seasonal rains, the sunshine the waxing and the waning of the moon are in reality the outward expression of the inner reality of women's lives. What happens in nature is what happens in women. Women give from the abundance of their inner being to their children. So also Nature is the bounteous mother in whom the relationship of exploitative dependency like the parasite is altered, challenged and transformed to reflect the relationship of interconnectedness of all beings. Water, food, fodder, fuel, fruits and the like are inevitable in the daily living of any ordinary woman. Her vocation in life is in a way bound up with these essential ingredients of life.

When a child is conceived in the womb of the mother her whole self is focused in attention to care for the new life implanted in her being. She does not hesitate to take the necessary steps in caring for her child tirelessly. Often her own life is at risk in the process of ensuring security for her child. However the link

between the mother and the child lies in the fact that when the mother stops breast feeding nature takes over as the bounteous mother who continues to give without counting. This vital link with mother earth can never be replaced by any other relationship. Human beings can adopt children from other parents but no other option is there for us from our intimate link with mother earth. Therefore the only way to make this relationship true to nature's needs is through Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development is the ultimate key to the building up of "Global Partnership".

Sustainable development stands in opposition to the demands of aggressive competition and profit which has a direct link with dominance, sexism, exhaustion of resources and global population. Eco-feminism is based on the principle of Solidarity among the human and the non-human. It is based on the system of global partnership of all beings. It is a matter of reinforcing our common identity and basic oneness of all beings. It is based on the principle of respect to every person beyond the boundaries of race, caste, religion and gender.

This goal can be achieved only if the governments along with the people focus attention on the vital problems faced by the people and create policies based on the co-operation and democratic participation of the people. Curbing illegal operation by politicians and promoting a strategic plan of the well being of all is the sure way to ensure the goal of Eco-feminism. In promoting this value our society needs to learn from the wisdom of our mothers who in the normal circumstances never discriminate between children but are always caring more for the weaker ones or the handicapped ones than the others. To learn from our mothers is in fact to learn from the creator who gives freedom and watches over our growth and becoming. God is bountiful in letting His children take charge and lead the way towards greater solidarity, greater participation and greater humanisation. Nature in her abundance is always giving and nurturing. Even in the wildest of nature we find the existence of harmony, interdependence and holism. There is equality of the great and the small. Every one has the right to exist and defend oneself.

V The Goal of Eco-Feminism

Eco-feminism is about the experience and the exercise of power in nature and in women "to nurture life". Therefore to enhance the power of women and enable them to be the guardians of nature to be in its own right is the goal of eco-feminism. Empowering women to protect and promote the natural wealth with all its diversity while human beings take from nature what they need only, is the foundation of the principle of Eco-feminism.

Empowerment and Its Essential Components

Women in every age have expressed their dissent however small it might be. Kongar Padai of the 9th century, the myth of Kundalakesi, the concept of Artha Narishwar, the women of the Bhakti movement, Panditha Ramabai, the women of the Independence movement, the Chipko women (Itwari Devi), Medha Patkar, Arundati Roy etc., are some of the samples of women who have protested and expressed their resistance. What do we see in these women?

a) The Concept of Empowerment

The above mentioned women were empowered with a new vitality and a vision that gave them confidence in themselves and in others to change the society. At the heart of this empowerment is the exercise of power. Power to nurture, to integrate, to uphold and to enhance the possibilities of growth and becoming. Empowerment means the capacity to rejuvenate life and the process of multiplying this possibility for all people as well as the ecological system. Women ought to be able to build a society/family based on their innate power of protecting life. This need arises from the source of life which touches every aspect of our humanisation process. Such a fulfilment depends on the way women gain access and control over resources. Empowerment relates to the way power is controlled, exercised and administered in the service of others. Therefore it is dynamic and relational. Empowerment of women can be sustained only if it is supported by the ideology of equality, opportunity for participation and a firm belief that women are able to fulfil their decisions for the betterment of the society and for themselves.

Empowerment immediately relates to resisting every form of oppression. Only through continued resistance can we counter the dominant ideology of exploitation. It means resisting the power of patriarchy in all its manifestations. The power of the political systems, the economic systems, the social systems as well as the religious systems has to be systematically questioned and challenged in order to remake them as instruments in the service of the people. When women begin to assert themselves in this manner and gain control it is named as feminism. Feminism is an ideology that creates consciousness of women's exploited existence and enables people to act in favour of women. Therefore women and men who share this ideology are known as feminists.

In India we call this experience as Shakti meaning power as experienced in their very being. It means the latent power in women which being awakened gets energised by the consciousness of the experience of oppression and becomes a collective force for resistance and change. Women's empowerment therefore can be defined as the process by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources, challenge the ideology of patriarchy and discrimination against women as well as the marginalised and ensure a future with dignity and mutual respect.

Organized action calls for a professionalism and skilled intervention.

b) Aspects

- Personal integration
- To belong and be Equal
- Public relation and skills of communication
- Planning and executive capability
- Access to and control over economic resources
- Political participation and decision making power
- Assertiveness in society for the common cause
- Collaborative involvement and networking with other NGOs and GO
- Cultural rejuvenation and promotion of alternative culture

- Promoting the possibility of ecological democracy
- Spiritual Quest intensified by God-consciousness/social consciousness

Animation As the Key to Empowerment

Human potential lies in the form of a seed within. It awaits like the seed to be met with appropriate conditions to spring up and to sprout. It means to be alive and moving. *Anima* means spirit and life. To bring out the dynamic power hidden within the person is the task of animation. It touches the core of the person in awakening the hidden power which has been the gift of nature to the person for experiencing the fullness of life. The openness of a person as well as the commitment for total involvement is the signs that a person has been animated to face the challenge of empowerment.

Women's Empowerment Strategy

a) Affirming Self Dignity and Establishing Identity

Women power in action as experienced in the field more and more confirms the fact that change in society can come about only if women initiate it. Women are rising up to face the challenge of a changing world and are earnest in their involvement. They are no longer content with a passive self image but are activating the rest of society to be alive and active.

Women are establishing their self image through appropriate measures of self control by putting an end to street fights and by imposing self-discipline through punishment for the violators. In 1986 the women of Kilambady imposed 50 paise as the penalty for those who initiated a street fight. Today the women of Kalyan in Bihar have imposed Rs.500 for the same violation. It clearly indicates that awakened women can no longer accept their old condition of degradation and inefficiency. Rather they are gaining greater control over the situation by bearing the brunt on themselves. Men of the village begin to have a greater respect and recognition for women. This experience has infused a greater confidence in women because of the trust men showed. The net result is a gradual change in the ideology of oppression and a changed perception of women.

b) Gaining Access and Control over Human Knowledge and Material Resources. Channeling Government Resources / Programmes to Villages Which will Benefit all Members

Women tirelessly work till they get the benefit of the allotted funds for their village. Collective involvement is the key to understand the process of empowerment among women. This is the way women pressurise the Government to act in favour of them. Integrity of creation is indeed a reflection of the integrity of the community. Sustainable development has become the pressure point in empowering action. Women are more and more entering into the practice of sustainable agriculture. Refraining from the practice of chemical fertilizers and pesticides women are being trained in producing natural manure and pesticide. The yield is better and gives women greater access to nutritious food and creates a healthy family. This is a small step but a definite shift in the ideology of production as well as a shift in the economic priorities of profit. Sustainable agriculture is becoming a strong component in women's empowerment.

c) Upholding Inclusive Relationship

The journey of humanity is one of partnership and accompaniment. We need to recognise each other as man and woman in our efforts to build partnership and mutual relationship.

d) Obligation in the Choice of Developmental Activities

Even in their poverty women are motivated to be sensitive to the needs of the poorest in their village. Allowing the needy person to have the first opportunity is a moral strength.

Stories of Women in Action – A Sign of Empowerment

Kalyan women of Bihar – unlettered – are now managing bank transactions, literacy programme, collective farming, ensuring children's education and are gaining greater access to material resources. Mullukundu village women are dealing with men in their village in making them partners in the process of change and dealing with the desertion cases. Sempatti women of Tamil Nadu have organized themselves in developing sustainable agriculture. They are preparing the manure and fertilizers by themselves in the field as well as the pesticides from nature. They

have achieved the power to decide on the crops to be grown and to market their produce, and obtained better nutritious food for their family (for themselves). The women of Kolkata have organized themselves into a cooperative for their own production of handicrafts which are being exported. The Bhill women of Rajasthan are getting organized towards greater sensitivity to their environment which is prone to be drought-hit. They are exploring alternatives to migration. The women of Andhra Pradesh have exerted great influence in making the Government act in favour of them. The Kodagu women of Karnataka have networked themselves into a strong force wielding influence at the Government level in dealing with access to resources as well as claiming justice for women when they are violated.

Women's Empowerment in Three Levels

a) At Local Level

The strength of the Indian women is found in the grass root movements which have sprouted all over the country. Women have proved their calibre in claiming a place for themselves in the society and by placing their demands for a just society and by getting the benefits which are their due from the ruling administration. They have successfully demonstrated that *mahila shakti* – the power of women is indeed the great power in society.

b) At State and National Levels

The middle class and upper class women articulate the demand of all ordinary women for respect for the dignity of womanhood and make the demand move beyond the village and town levels to the state and national levels by protesting against atrocities and violence against women, by highlighting the fact that woman's right is indeed a "human right", and by placing before governments and international organisations the need to create a just society. Against Phokaran, Pune protests by the All India Women's Studies (AIWS), women claim "we want jobs for our youth, food, and dignity for all and not nuclear power." Movements like 'Women's Voice Bangalore', Vimochana, NAWO claim Rs 150 as the basic daily wage for an unorganised and unskilled worker. Chipko makes claim for the right of women over the forests and for the preservation of life on earth with a

sustainable development policy. Narmadha Bachao Andolan claims clean politicians in their governance.

c) At International Level

Today women have also begun to create a dent in the international system. International politics and decision making cannot ignore the demands of women. The demands are:

- Elimination of all forms of violence against women.
- Rights of the girl child.
- Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.
- Considering women's Right as a Human Right.
- Passing the food security into women's hands.
- Protection and preservation of nature and for the ecological democracy.
- Elimination of deadly weapons and the nuclear threat.

Strong institution building and creating on an urgent basis structures that act in favour of the poor are the new perspectives towards a bright future.

1. Affirming Womanhood and Building

The future belongs to women to create a civilisation of dignity and self respect based on the values of equality and compassionate love. The future of humanity is in the hands of women who are awakened to the reality of their own humanness. Only the awakened will be able to create appropriate conditions for the awakening of others.

Every failure becomes a stepping stone to success because the self-realised one gains the courage and the wisdom to convert every failure in facing a problem into an opportunity for growth. Therefore no failure is counted as failure rather it is converted into positive energy for growth and becoming.

2. Outliving the Dreams and Resisting Opposition

The feminisation of poverty ought to be fought against on a war footing. To oppose poverty is already a step in the direction towards the upliftment of women and for their future happiness as well. Say 'no' to violence to women. Actively initiate the process of reducing illiteracy. Every woman must have a dream that outlives

her limited self. The universe is God's gift to women to be the extension of the motherliness which is part of God and of our being. Women need to envision the possibility of a sustainable universe which cares for all her children.

3. Kindling the Power to Change Structures

If we take our mission seriously to instil the value of enhancing the process of empowerment among the women who are in our institutions, at our door step and in our surrounding, it is possible to realize our dream in the near future. Secular women, most of whom have not the privilege of education, have already launched into the movement. How about us the religious women? Mary of the Passion was passionately on love with this mission towards women. The early Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM) were involved in getting the women of the poorer class for economic betterment and self development.

The preparation towards the realization of this goal in life must meet with the appropriate opportunity. Let us dare to create this appropriate condition. Instead of blaming the other let each one of us do our bit by lighting a candle. Sure it is bound to fan into a flame of great magnitude. The future lies in the hands of women. Can we miss the opportunity!¹¹

4. The Mission of the New Era

We are called to be change makers and trend setters of our times. Change makers are those who see with a new vision and analytically understand the reality from a new perspective. It means unlearning those which are outdated and learning those which give relevance and meaning for our existence. It means decoding our minds, emerging as innovators rather than imitators, emerging as leaders from the experience of being followers, i.e., from reimagining God. Whatever we may do as non-institutional persons happens to remain as a dole out and as a charity for which no one will be held accountable. It waters down our whole quest

¹¹ Some of the above reflections are part of a paper presented by Stella Baltazar fmm to the FMM Asian JPIC Team and Provincial Feb. 1st to 15th 2001 Conference.

for change and turns out to be strengthening and stabilising the existing system.

Having good will is the starting point. But remaining only with good will is the end of goodness. It makes us become insipid and irrelevant while we seem to proclaim justice. This contradiction can end only when we make attempts to professionalise our response. It means learning the art of integrating the vision of a new society, the Kingdom of God on earth, with adequate and appropriate skills of involvement.

The new vision, as a servant, as a leader and as a prophet, is imbued with the spirituality of the Exodus 3: 1-7 and Lk: 4:16-21.

To feel the pain of the poor and experience their cry from within; to be claimed by the poor that we belong to them; to claim them as our aim in accomplishing our mission.

For this we need The capacity to grasp the emerging moment and its demand; The capacity to analyse the context and name the root cause of the problem The ability to diagnose the situation and find the right solution to the problem and accept the consequence of such a choice and involvement.

In this venture we need to develop a Triangular Support System. It means to create the best of the institutional possibilities along with the best of the Human resources (personnel) to meet the marginalised poor (making our choice clear).

Possible Areas of New Ventures

1. Sustainable Development: Capital intensive economy tends to focus on the competitive market and places great emphasis on profit without realizing that any profit at one end creates a dent on the other end. On the contrary subsistent economy cares for the needs of the people and does not focus on hoarding and accumulating wealth to the detriment of others. We need a development pattern that gives priority to the poor. We need to ensure that the future generations will have equal right over the resources of this earth. Forcefully taking them away from them is the crime of the modern society. Can we address the issue of unbridled consumerism? Do we have the capacity to take up this task to ensure that the poor have a fair

share of the profits and affirm their right as equal citizens? Can we be the midwives in this process?

2. Water harvesting and eco-regeneration programme: Assessment as well as control of resources by women have to be considered.
3. Sustainable agriculture: Encouraging and educating women in developing bio-products and helping them to resist the usage of chemical pesticides and fertilisers is important. Developing the expertise of women in indigenous methods of food production and resisting the hybridised varieties is necessary. FAO of the UN as well as ILO have stated that Green Revolution has failed the poor and women. Its benefits have been side tracked and hijacked by a minority section. Today food security has come under severe attack by the MNCs. Increasing monopolisation and profit orientation through cash crops has increased landlessness among the poor farmers, unemployment and community displacement of people, lowered the nutritious levels in food, increased transportation costs etc. which has led to the loss of food security. Can we plough in new impetus to protect food security?
4. Developing specific programs for the marginalised persons such as street children, domestic workers, migrant labourers, unemployed youth, etc.
5. Systematic awareness building and creating resistance to unbridled consumerism. In the field of education we should develop the consciousness of students that they are the trend setters of the day.
6. Providing professional competence and skill building for the target population to face the onslaught of globalisation.

5. New Strategies for Reclaiming the Missing Steps and Re-imaging Mission

Developing methodological tools in the way of implementation through systematic and streamlined planning (SWOT, SMART, PRA, LFA), realistic assessment of Pilot Projects in Schools based on specific issues with well organised planning, monitoring and evaluation systems etc. are necessary. (Sustainable Development entails people-owned Plan Development, Subaltern

Initiatives, Women's Empowerment, Sustainable agriculture, Watershed Programme, Self Help Groups, Eco-feminism.)

This section deals with the myth of stopping our thinking with the creation of a vision and action plan. Even though this is a necessary ingredient of the mission, it paralyses continuity in operation. Translating our vision into mission demands the creation of viable structures of operation.

Spirituality of Integration That Supports This New Venture

Reimagining God as the God of the Pilgrim People in search of true freedom and liberation, we need to rediscover the Lord of the Eucharist as the one in whom the smiles of the poor converge.

Learning to break the Bread and ourselves in this venture by creating "NEW COMMUNITIES", communities of collaboration and solidarity. Action, not exclusively of the religious affiliation, will remain the primary motivating factor. The fivefold integration of self, God, community, structures of society, and Nature is the path to this spirituality.

Let us become trend setters of our times and not remain as trailers behind. This is the call God extends to us. Awake, arise and stop not the prophet in you. Let the prophet emerge from within ourselves and announce the dawn of a new age to dare and to care to give birth to a Humanised world.
