UNIT 5: CULTURE, GENDER AND ENVIRONMENT

UNIT STRUCTURE

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- understand the relationship between culture and environment
- explain the relationship between social structure and natural resources
- discuss the role of women in the protection of the commons.

5.2 INTRODUCTION

Culture describes patterns of learned human behaviour that form a durable template by which ideas and images of one generation can be transferred to another generation. Culture- environment relationship or nature-society interface, in the recent years has tended to be relegated to the fringes of discussions, as post-modernism and culturalist perspectives have dominated the centre stage of theoretical developments in the social

sciences generally There are a number of reasons why this theme is now in the forefront of the public agenda, one of them being the ongoing changes in the culture-environment relationship, with sociologists is getting an opportunity to use their competence to address debated environmental issues such as the mechanisms of a sustainablemode of livelihood in non-industrial societies, the scope and status of indigenous or traditional knowledge and techniques of resource management, the ideological foundations of conservationist movements, the challenges coming up in the wake of climate change etc.In this unit, we will be basically studying and understanding of the culture-environment relationship.

5.3 CULTURE-ENVIRONMENT RELATIONSHIP

The environment refers not to biophysical context, but also to human interaction with, and interpretation of that context which is culturally perceived; the environment, therefore, is not just a set of things to which people adapt, but also a mutual adaptation between culture and material context. According to Anderson (1977), in common usage, studies that deal in any way with man-environment relations are labelled 'ecological'. Ecology is the study of relationship between living organisms and their natural environment. Anderson pointed out that it is not equivalent to environment, although it is frequently used in this sense. It does not, in any strict sense, refer to the unforeseen consequences of many of man's activities, as in the phrase 'ecological disaster'; neither it is synonymous with conservation, narrowly construed. He preferred to define ecology as 'the study of entire assemblages of living organisms and their physical milieus, which together constitute integrated systems'. This definition in his view has the advantage of providing a framework that includes the study of all species. Moreover, environment in this view is seen not as external, but as an integral component of the total system- the 'givens' of the system.

5.3.1 Environmental Determinism

According to the theory of environmental determinism, environmental features have a direct impact on the features of human behaviour, and thus,

on human society. It is based on the belief that the patterns of human culture and societal development are determined by the environment (most notably its physical factors such as landforms and/or climate). The German scholar Friedrich Ratzel was impressed by the influence of the natural setting on the ways of life of peoples and held the view the habitat of a people cannot be neglected in assessing those influences that play on the formation and functioning of culture. However, his followers changed this to a more rigid formulation, which held that the habitat is the determining factor in shaping a way of life, which is called environmental determinism.

5.3.2 Environmental Possibilism

The early work of American anthropologists like that of Goldenweisser (1937) was characterised by a stress on historical and cultural descriptions, which focused on the uniqueness of human groups. Environment acts as an inert force that narrows human options and no dynamic role was played in surfacing of observable human traits or institutions. In The Mind of Primitive Man (1911), Boas noted that the environment furnishes the material out of which people shaped and developed the artefacts of daily life.Out of these basic works, thus, grew the theory of environmental possibilism or the particularist position that cultures, environments and histories are so variable that any generalisation is difficult. The development of social and cultural patterns, was recognized by the theory recognizes and it has paid sufficient attention to variation- the extent to which human beings has altered his environments and how subsistence patterns were moulded by social organisation and belief.

5.3.3 Cultural Ecology

We have already read about the concept of Cultural Ecology in Unit 1. In this section we shall be discussing about the concept of cultural ecology in greater details. During the 1950s, scholars witnessed one of the seminal works regarding the relationship between culture and environment, which remains to this day, a legacy that informs the dominant stream of interactional- analytical thinking on this issue. This was Steward's basic

notion of 'adaptive interaction', which is the basis for his Cultural Ecology. His theory of Cultural Ecology stands intermediate between the deterministic and possibilist position and refers to 'a reciprocal or interactional phrasing of man-environment relations neither which assumes that man nor environment is necessarily. Steward developed Cultural Ecology as a framework for causal explanation of cultural differences and similarities. He seized on ecological considerations and environmental influences as a remedy to cultural relativism and 'the fruitless assumption that culture comes from culture'. Steward was generally familiar with the ecological and biological principles of his time and felt that the principal meaning of Ecology was adaptation to environment. Steward framed his approach in terms of adaptation and the adaptive processes through which a historically derived culture is modified in a particular environment, arguing on analytical and empirical grounds that over the millennia, cultures in different environments have changed tremendously, and these changes are basically traceable to new adaptations required by changing technology and productive arrangements. Thus, the method of Cultural Ecology developed by him stressed on technology, asserting that the key to the adaptation of a culture is its technology. Steward was concerned with cross-cultural comparisons and with the causal connection between social structure and modes of subsistence. The crucial focus in his approach was neither on environment nor culture. Rather, the process of resource utilisation, in its fullest sense, was research priority. The cultural ecological approach proposed by him involved both a problem and a method. The problem was to test whether the adjustment of human societies to their environments required specific type of behaviour or whether there is considerable latitude to human responses. The method, according to him, involved three procedures:

- To analyse the inter-relationship of exploitative or productive technology and environment.

  To analyse the behaviour patterns involved in the exploitation of a particular area by means of a particular technology.

- To ascertain the extent to which the behaviour pattern entailed in exploiting the environment affect other aspects of culture.

  According to Moran (1984), the value of Cultural Ecology lies in the fact that from the broad generalities of the environmental determinists and the detailed inductive findings of the possibility, Steward proposed a research method that paid both careful attention to empirical details that causally linked the cognized environment, social organisation, and the behavioural expressions of human resource use.

5.3.4 Cultural Materialism

Cultural materialism is a theoretical framework and research method for examining the relationships between the physical and economic aspects of production and built society, social organization and social relations, and the values, beliefs, and worldviews that predominate that society.Marvin Harris attempted to explain ecology and culture by developing an explicit and systematic scientific research strategy, which is called as cultural materialism. Harris and his students applied this research strategy to explain arbitrary religious beliefs and customs in terms of ecological adaptation. He argued that one must take this whole system into account if one wants to understand why cultures differ from place to place and group to group, why certain cultural products like art and consumer goods (among others) are produced in a given place, and what their meaning is to those who use them.

Later, Raymond Williams, a Welsh academic, further developed the theoretical paradigm and research method, and in doing so, helped create the field of cultural studies in the 1980s. Embracing the political nature of Marx's theory and his critical focus on power and the class structure, Williams's cultural materialism took aim at how culture and cultural products relate to a class-based system of domination and oppression. Williams built his theory of cultural materialism using already existing theoretical critiques of the relationship between culture and power, including the writings

of Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

5.4 SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

The conception of social structure as rules and resources is now distinctly associated with Anthony Giddens, who elaborates his meaning of structure as 'Structures can be analysed as rules and resources, which can be treated as 'sets' in so far as transformations and mediations can be identified between the reproduced properties of social systems'. Social structure consistsof those patterns of relationships that Giddens refers to as social systems.According to Giddens, such patterns of relationships do not themselves constitute social structure rather; the structure consists of the rules and resources associated with those relationships. The structure refers to the actual organization of society - the distribution of income, the division of labor, etc., whereas for Giddens, structure refers to an organizing principlebehind the actual organization, namely rules and resources.

Resources provide us with our final conceptual link between social activity in organizations and the surrounding social structure. Resources similarly can be distinguished according to whether they derive from the organization itself or from the surrounding social structure. Organizational resource are the kind most familiar to organizational sociologists access to funds, information, communication channels, and institutionalized means of enforcing compliance with decisions. These resources are available to groups in organizations on the basis of their functional role position. To the degree that class distinctions are synonymous with functional distinctions in an organization, organizational resources will be synonym with another dimension of resources those that derive from the broader society." This second range of resources is available to groups in organizations on their position in the class structure. The mobilization of either type of resource is an important determinant of the outcome of conflicts and thus the course of change in organizations.Resources are the one that is critical in linking structures of authority in organizations to historical changes in social structure. Large scale changes in social structure shift the availability of a

wide range of resources to classes represented in an organization. These resources are any variety of social or material factors which can be brought t o bear on class relations for the purpose either of changing or maintaining them. This can include simple property ownership, recourse t o a large pool of liquid assets,access to organized means of coercion, and even possessionof skills or education all of which can be used t o maintain or change existing relations. The control over various factors of production land, labor,capital is a prime example of a kind of resource crucial inshaping group relations the availability of which shifts with large-scale changes in social structure.

5.5 ECO-FEMINISM

We have discussed about Eco-Feminism in the previous unit. But an elaborate understanding of Eco-feminism is required in this context to understand the relationship between gender and environment. Here we shall learn about Cultural Eco feminism, Social Eco feminism so on and so forth. Eco-feminism as a theory is a combination of ideas that support the fight for women's empowerment and that of a viable, sustainable environment. Braidotti (1994) defines eco-feminism as 'the feminist position most explicitly concerned with environmental degradation'. Thus, eco-feminism is an association between women and nature. Francoise d'Eaubonne, the French feminist credited with the emergence of the idea of eco-feminism as both women and nature are mistreated and subjugated. She suggests that the only way to save the environment is through the destruction of male power by women. Yet, eco-feminism is much more than a mere disapproval and destruction of the male power. It is very much embedded in the way women are closely associated with the environment in the multiple ways in which they are perceived.

Eco-feminism emerged due to various reasons: Firstly, the nature is viewed in terms of feminine principle. Through ancient ages, women in general are considered as an inseparable part of nature. At one level, nature is symbolised as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance the

world derives its activity and diversity manifest in the form of life on earth, mountains, trees, rivers, animals etc. The human being is to live in consonance with nature. Unfortunately, man's attitude towards nature has turned into that of a dominant force, who can subjugate nature to the maximum extent. This symbolises man's eternal urge to demonstrate domination over woman. She credits women with producing and reproducing life not merely biologically but also in terms of providing sustenance, more so a social role.

Eco-feminism was coined as a term in 1974 when Frenchwoman Francoise d' Eubonne called for an ecological revolution to be led by women in order to save planet Earth. Eco-feminism has evolved both as an analysis of society-nature relations and as a prescription for how these relations can be transformed. Broadly, these analyses fall within two areas: cultural eco-feminism and social eco-feminism. Cultural eco-feminism indentifies a powerful and positive link between women and nature, particularly through such female reproductive functions as childbirth and menstruation. This connection between women and nature is used to argue that women are better placed than men as advocates of nature.

Social eco-feminism argues that because women and nature have both been subjugated by a society dominated by men, women, through the roles they play, are in a better position than men to speak for nature, because of this shared experience of domination. Social eco-feminists contest that there is anything more natural in a woman's body than in man's and disagree with cultural eco-feminists' belief that there is something which constitutes a woman's essence. The cultural eco-feminists basically attempt to reverse the traditional hierarchy of male domination over women demonstrating the positive side of those characteristics previously held to be inferior and stressing the importance of women-nature links to the survival of nature. On the other hand, social eco-feminist perspective argues that it is the social role ascribed to women which identifies women more closely with nature. Women's closeness to nature, they argue, is more out of the social construction through generations. It is because of this that the women find

themselves unable to distance themselves from nature and experience subjugation and discrimination based on their socially ascribed caring role. These two perspectives are often incorporated in the eco-feminist arguments with ecological and social analysis. Eco-Feminism as a broad, diverse, world-wide movement unique eco-feminist approaches Liberal eco-feminists who seek reform from within existing political and economic structures. Radical eco-feminists who wish to dismantle those very structures through direct action.

Women and Environment, Women and Peace Socialist eco-feminists who draw on neo-Marxist philosophies to focus on the relationship between production and reproduction and on women's work in the continued biological and social reproduction of life on Earth. Ecological eco-feminists who strive to show the respects in which eco-feminism and the science of ecology (specifically eco-system ecology) share vital similarities. The Eco-feminist perspective(also referred to as the Women, Environment and Development perspective) holds that there is a natural link between women and environment as both are involved in creation of life. The post-colonial developmentexploited both nature and women's labour which is the characteristic of capitalism and patriarchy. As a result of this linkage and dual exploitation, women have a greater interest in ending domination over nature and their own lives.Eco-feminists see the patriarchal dominance of women by men as the prototype of all domination and exploitation in various hierarchical, militaristic, capitalist, and industrialist forms.

5.6 WOMEN AND PROTECTION OF THE COMMONS

Ivan Illich states the environment as commons from the environment as resource.Common property resource is defined from an economic point of view as 'a property on which well defined collective claims by and exclusive group are established, the use of the resource is subtractive, having the characteristic of a public good such as indivisibility shall be termed as common property.' This definition has two distinct features, first the nature of the resource is that of a public good and second, it should have an

association with a community or a user group in a specific way, with collective claims (hence governance). The idea of the 'Commons' expresses a broader conception of property, referring to social goods-lands, territories, forests, meadows and streams, or communicative spaces-which a community, not the state or any individual, collectively owns, manages, and controls. As Uzma observes, women are in direct and daily contact with environment through their use of resource (food, fuel and water) and through their efforts to maintain secure and healthy environment for their families. They have a major role in managing natural resources- soil, water, forests and energy. Their tasks in agriculture and animal husbandry as well as in the household make them daily managers of the family living environments.

Women are said to have more capacity than men in meeting environmental challenges, the crisis that emanates during natural calamities or other forms of environmental degradation like pollution of all sorts. They work harder than men in keeping the entire household and surroundings clean and maintain hygiene. In the urban settings, the task is all the more arduous because in lower income groups, the families often end up living in slums and unhygienic conditions, making the task of women all the more difficult. The task of fetching water is more or less similar in the roles of urban and rural women. While in rural areas, women go as far as seven or ten kilometres to fetch water, in urban areas, it varies from 20-100 metres distance. In both the cases, by spending so much time on these activities, women give an extra time to fulfil these household duties. Water is one natural resource that has become scarce in nature and over which many conflicts have arisen.

Fuel is another resource for which women struggle to meet their ends. Bina Agarwal observes that, "the gathering of food alone demands an elaborate knowledge of the nutritional and medicinal properties of plants, roots and trees, including a wide reserve knowledge of edible plants not normally used but critical for coping with prolonged shortages during climatic disasters". It is women who have kept alive these traditional resource management and knowledge and have greatly contributed to devising coping

up mechanisms during any kind of disasters. The caring of nature has thus a gender-specific dimension, wherein women are often taken as surviving any calamity and responsible for restoration of nature to its originality.

The role of women in various environmental movements is highly recognised and lauded. They have been at the forefront preventing the destruction of environment and saving the surrounding ecology and as well as inhabitants. Two prime examples in our country include The Chipko Movement (literally meaning hug the Trees Movement) and Narmada Bachao Movement (Save Narmada Movement). While the former prevented the felling of trees in the Himalayan region for commercial purposes, the latter sought to rehabilitate and provide adequate compensation to those displaced due to flooding of the villages because of dam construction. In both the cases, women have taken lead to protect and preserve the natural environment. A striking feature of environmental movements in modern India,has been the crucial role played by women. They have taken to the streets to protest forest felling, unregulated mining, displacement, and overfishing. They have also taken the lead in programs of environmental restoration; in the planting up of bare hillsides, in the conservation of local sources of water supply, and in the promotion of energy-efficient technologies. In India as way back as the 1970s a wave of environmental movements spread thanks to the dedicated involvement of women fighting to safeguard their environment and resources. The most famous of these was the Chipko Movement that gathered steam in the hills of India affecting village after village.

Another very significant example of women's involvement in the fight against human and environmental injustice is the infamous Bhopal gas tragedy occurred in 1984. A mass movement of women gasvictims in response to the indiscriminate and avoidable death ofaround 4000 people to gas poisoning from the Union Carbide factory. It is these stories of courage and activism that have inspired feminists andenvironmental activists around the world. These movementsinspired eco-feminists to fight for the rights of women and theenvironment.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: How does culture affect the environment?

Q2: What is the difference between culture and environment?

Q3: What is environmental culture?

Q4: What is the role of gender and environment?



5.8 LET US SUM UP

- Gender refers to the social classification of men and women into masculine and feminine and reflects the existing power relationship in any given society. It is a socio-cultural phenomenon. Women have been historically given a lower socio-economic and political status in society and this continues in modern society.
- Democracy and development are two main areas by which the state has to progress in order to modernise the state, society and institutions in order to guarantee equal and legal rights to both men and women. In this respect women too have put their effort in the movement for restoration of democracy aid subsequent development.
- In this Unit, you have learnt about the women's contribution to the field of environment and how traditionally as well as in modern times, they have come to be identified as nurturers of nature.
- The Unit also highlights the eco-feminism. It also highlights the outstanding contribution of some of the women throughout history and in the contemporary times by citing some example and looks at the importance of an ideology that aims to bring togetherthe shared causes of women and the environment.



5.9 FURTHER READING

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10) Parveen, Uzma, 2009, Women and Environmental Management, Women Press, New Delhi,

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5.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: People have the greatest impact on the environment in the ways that they exploit natural resources and dispose of waste. Different human cultures have had varying effects on their environments. Some cultures, particularly hunter-gatherer and small-scale agricultural societies, have little environmental impact.

Ans to Q No2: The difference between environment and cultureis that environment is the surroundings of, and influences on, a particular item of interest while culture is the arts, customs, and habits that characterize a particular society or nation.

Ans to Q No 3: A cultural environment is a set of beliefs, practices, customs and behaviours that are found to be common to everyone that is living within a certain population. Culturalenvironments shape the way that every person develops, influencing ideologies and personalities.

Ans to Q No 4: Men and women relate to the environment in different ways, and environmentalchanges have different impacts on their lives. Women play a critical role in sustaining communities and managing natural resources, but their contributions are often undervalued and neglected.



5.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

Short Questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q1 : Write short notes on the following:

a. Environmental Possibilism

b. Environmental Determinism

c. Cultural Materialism

Q2: Explain the relationship between culture and environment.

Q3: Write a brief note om women and protection of the commons.

Long Questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q1: What are the key aspects of Julian Steward's theory of Cultural Ecology?

Q2: Explain eco-feminism. Examine the various aspects associated with it.

Q3: Explain how women are related to nature and culture?

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