PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE POLITICS OF WOMEN'S ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION IN INDIA

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The theoretical framework of Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) explicitly examines the real-life experiential concerns that motivate rural and urban women-initiated environmental movements around the world. The work done within FPE demonstrates how gender, understood as culturally defined male-female sex roles, structures access to particular types of knowledge, space, resources, and political processes. Considering gender in the context of a variety of socio-economic issues such as the commercialization of production, rapidly changing gendered livelihoods, property regimes, and social relations enables FPE scholars to offer a materialist analysis of the problems women face due to environmental degradation. I argue that FPE scholarship can be enhanced by employing an immanent methodology and extending this analysis to the strategies that women's groups employ in their work. An interrogation of these strategies is important as it helps us understand the kinds of institutions, knowledge, and democratic practices that these groups are building up at local, national, and transnational levels.

In my research, I build on the insights of FPE scholars whose work is often informed by women's environmental activism by uniquely offering a comparative analysis of the strategies of three women's environmental groups in a single country. Seeking to assess patterns that exist in women's environmental activism in India, I selected organizations (Navdanya, the Deccan Development Society, and Omon) that were situated differently with regards to access to resources, links to transnational

networks, and gendered critiques of environmental degradation. Using an immanent method, I found that, although they face an array of different obstacles and employ various strategies in their activism, all three groups analytically connect their problems to both a lack of "participatory democracy[1]" and a women-specific marginalization. Within their activism, I identified certain strategies that were paradoxical in relation to remedying these issues.

Examining not only how they see their problems but also their actions based on this understanding reveals the impacts that the norms of society, the market, and culture have on their resistance. By offering a critical eye on these groups' activism, I intend to join marginalized citizens within their organizations in reflecting on and improving their struggle for environmental and social justice. Using immanent critique I examine the groups' discourses and strategies and assess these against their own stated aims. In so doing, I make not only a theoretical contribution to Feminist Political Ecology, but also a methodological contribution as well.

In the chapters that follow, I give a more detailed and critical analysis of these groups' strategies, as well as the theoretical and practical implications of my research. To get a better sense of the contribution this dissertation makes to the broader field of feminist environmentalism, Chapter Two provides a critical review of the literature in that field. Building on the understanding and framework of Feminist Political Ecology, Chapter Three provides a critical analysis of the strategies that these groups employ. I argue that while their different forms of activism reveal the common theme of tying a gender-integrated discourse on environmentalism to broader struggles for participatory

[1] This term will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

democracy, those strategies that require engagement with state and local governance structures can at times be problematic. Chapter Four examines the strategies that these groups use in their activism that targets women specifically and addresses how these groups approach the marginalization of women's voices and employment opportunities. I argue that the representations of women they employ in their activism are motivated either by ecofeminist understandings of women as closer to nature or hierarchical efficiency models that see women as implementers of environmental solutions. In Chapter Five, I conclude with the theoretical implications of this study for existing scholarship and consider what this analysis means for social movement activists themselves.

To set up the following chapters, this introduction provides an overview of my research design. First, I identify the different organizations I studied and give a brief description of the data I used for each. Second, drawing on that data, I provide an overview of each group's perception of their political context, offering insight into why they find themselves engaged in their current struggles. Third, I break down the different aspects of my methodology from the development of my research question and choice of immanent critique to the ethics and responsibilities of my feminist research approach. I conclude this chapter by laying out the contribution this dissertation makes to both Feminist Political Ecology and women's environmental activism.

Organizations and Data

To find the types of discourses and strategies that women's groups use in their activism against environmental degradation, I studied three women's environmental

organizations in India – Navdanya, the Deccan Development Society (DDS), and Omon. As each group had a different organizational structure, I adopted a mixed methods research design, gathering material through archival research, research on-line, interviews, and participant observation. Archival research consisted of literature produced by the NGOs themselves (this literature was both in Hindi and English), including web-based content, emails, flyers, brochures, press releases, fundraising letters, and campaign reports. These documents describe the mission of the organization, the group the NGO serves, its strategies of representation, and their social and historical context. This mixed methods research design was integral in accumulating the data needed to assess groups with such differing degrees of resources, networks, and gendered critiques. In the paragraphs below, I briefly describe each organization and detail the specific kinds of data I used to analyze their work.

Navdanya

Navdanya is an organization working on issues of ecologically sustainable agriculture and has a great deal of transnational visibility and resources. It is headed by Vandana Shiva, a figure who has garnered a great deal of popularity worldwide for her struggles against environmental injustice. Navdanya runs specific campaigns on biodiversity conservation, environmental health, and the protection of indigenous knowledge against patents by multinational corporations. They run their main office out of New Delhi, but the organization also has a model organic farm in northern India.

Navdanya documents their campaigns and strategies in reports, newsletters, and magazines. This literature highlights the nature of their activism, which institutions they

are opposing, and the kinds of alternative measures they are calling for. They also produce specific reports on issues such as the World Trade Organization's impact on Indian agriculture, the dangers of biofuels, and the privatization of water in New Delhi. In addition, they produce short op-ed pieces in their magazines in response to political and economic issues that they might not necessarily be conducting active campaigns on but regard as important to their broader struggle. These issues are important to analyze as they show the linkages that the group sees itself making with other social justice issues and movements in India. This material was available for purchase at their New Delhi office. I attended two workshops on food security that were held at their organic farm in Dehradun in the months of October 2007 and February 2008. After further visiting their office in New Delhi, I found that Navdanya's organizational structure provided no lived narrative experience to analyze, leading me to draw most of my necessary data from their literature.

The Deccan Development Society

DDS concentrates its activism on issues of food sovereignty, land, and health rights. They have a fair amount of resources but tend to have a low profile internationally, focusing more on building regional networks and coalitions both within South India and in the South Asian region. They are a membership based organization. The 5,000 women members of the Society are mostly Dalits, the lowest group in the Indian social hierarchy. With the help of DDS, these women organize into groups, leasing and cultivating land collectively and organically. They focus their activism on building alternatives to international governance institutions and domestic agencies of the state.

DDS makes available on-line much of its campaign literature and reports on agriculture and environment-related issues. They also produce a number of documentaries and radio programs detailing their work and highlighting other social justice issues in the region. These are available for purchase at their office. Given that it is a membership based organization, DDS creates multiple opportunities for grassroots women to come together, deliberate about their problems, and propose solutions appropriate to their local context. For this reason, I chose to spend time doing participant-observation with the group. I spent the months of December 2007 and January 2008 at their field office in Andhra Pradesh. In addition to attending their nightly sangam meetings, I informally interviewed some of the women with the help of a translator.

Omon

The third group is Omon - literally meaning "seed." It is the women's wing of a larger organization named Bindrai Institute of Research Study and Action (B.I.R.S.A.). They are severely under-resourced and work in a politically volatile region of India (Noamundi Block of Singhbhum district in Jharkhand). The organization's initial work was in training women in traditional medicines and encouraging them to be healers in their own villages, but it has now expanded to include the support of women's struggles against domestic violence and exploitation. Their greater environmental activism has concerned extractive industries in the area. The number of mines in the region has proliferated in the last five years, causing a great deal of environmental destruction in the area as well as numerous health problems.

Because Omon produces virtually no online organizational campaign material or reports, it became necessary for me to rely mainly on participant observation and informal conversations with the staff. I found that most of the organizational literature of the group consisted of petitions in Hindi that the group has filed with various mining companies and government officials detailing their opposition to the opening of mines in the area. These were helpful in understanding both how they conceptualize their issues and how they couch them in language persuasive to their local community. I also found that this group employs a range of strategies in their activism including rallies, bataki (village deliberations), personal face-to-face conversations with women, public hearings, and meeting the village munda (head) to tell him about the mines and their "medicinal plant program." Additionally, they screen documentaries for women in the community on issues of mining and women's health. I spent the month of November 2007 in their field office in Jharkhand attending their weekly meetings, holding informal conversations with their staff, and going to various villages with members of their team.

Political Context within which these Organizations Work

In the following section, I offer a brief description as to the political context from which these groups' activism has emerged. Drawn from the organizations themselves through interviews and literature, this self-understanding of the context of their activism shows us what they are responding to in their political and social climate.

Navdanya

Not confined to the scope of a particular region, Navdanya's activism falls within the political context of national and international policy. The bulk of their work focuses on the immense influence that multinational corporations (MNCs), international financial institutions (IFIs), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have on marginalized communities around the world. They describe this influence as a sort of global takeover at the expense of local democratic practices (Navdanya 2005; Navdanya 2007a; Navdanya 2008a; Shiva 2006a). Against unmatchable money and power, Navdanya sees its greatest opportunity in exposing the effects of neoliberal globalization as it pertains to industrial agriculture, climate change, water rights, intellectual property rights, etc. By disseminating information within India as well as around the world, Navdanya seeks not only to force a change in the behavior of these transnational entities, but also to arouse the will of citizens to demand such change. Understanding that India cares both about its international image as a democracy and electoral support at home, Navdanya works on the assumption that their activism will have a boomerang effect and force legislative change at the level of the state (Shiva 2004; Shiva 2006c).

DDS and Andhra Pradesh

According to the government's National Crime Records Bureau, India has suffered over 182,000 farmer suicides since 1997, the majority of which have occurred in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh (Deccan Development Society 2006b; Sainath. 2009). When the government does compensate widows with a few hundred dollars, officials then wash their hands of the situation and ignore the problems that have led to this

worsening trend. With an actual surplus of food in 2002, DDS attributed an increase in farmer suicides to local agriculture switching to GM seeds for unreliable cash crops, as well as the decline in governmental credit to small farmers (Deccan Development Society 2005b). The importance of retaining community control over seed production was crucial to almost every woman I spoke to at DDS. At a women's health meeting I attended, Santoshimaa, an activist with DDS, told me,

> Seed companies only seem interested in promoting monocultures, but if you look at the traditional agriculture we are employing, we are growing between 8-22 varieties of crops. There is also less expenditure involved in our type of farming. In doing this, we think about our society's welfare; the seed companies only seem to think about money.[2]

When crops that were advertised to produce high yields failed, farmers then overwhelmed with debt drank the same pesticides foreign companies like Monsanto promised would save them (Quyum and Kiran Sakkhari 2005). Some of the women farmers of DDS have trained as documentary filmmakers and produced two films in 2003 and 2005 on the grievances people in their local community have had with BT cotton (Deccan Development Society 2003; Deccan Development Society 2005a). The documentaries capture the voices of family members of farmers who have committed suicide because of their inability to pay back the loans taken to purchase BT cotton seeds. Through these documentaries, they recount stories like those of Mekelswari, a woman farmer who had been growing cotton for years and not suffered major losses. In the 2005 film BT Cotton: A Three Year Fraud, she states,

> I went to Jangaon and bought two tins of BT cotton seeds and spent Rs. 3200. We planted the seed like they told us to. They told us that the pests wouldn't come… but it didn't happen that way. The crop was still full of pests.. they ate into the

[2] ISD11 2008

> leaves and left holes all over. They gave us a mandu (pesticide) and told us to spray it once. We did but the pests still overwhelmed it. Again, I bought pesticide and sprayed it thrice but the pests still continued to eat away at it. There was still no boll… nothing. Here and there we saw one or two bolls but most plants had none whatsoever (Deccan Development Society 2005a).

DDS shows rural employment figures stagnating over the last decade, with money diverted from development in agriculture and village level sectors to business parks and Special Economic Zones (Pimbert. and Wakeford 2002; Satheesh 2005a). They argue that while the state is supposed to be a watchdog regulating MNCs, officials seem more interested in getting whatever foreign revenue they can. Add these concerns to a food Public Distribution System that doesn't adequately identify need and relies on outside wheat and rice rather than traditional, more nutritious crops that small farmers more easily grow in the area, and DDS has become increasingly suspicious of the state's role in governance (Satheesh 2006; Satheesh 2005a).

Omon and Jharkhand

In 1894, the Land Acquisitions Act was passed by the British, allowing for land to be taken from tribal communities for the purpose of mining. Continuing after Independence, this practice set the stage for political corruption between mining companies and government leaders. With politicians responsive to more cohesive vote banks in North Bihar, Adivasis in Jharkhand (the southern part of Bihar) saw themselves as particularly vulnerable to such corruption (Dias 2006; Jewitt 2008). Issues such as land alienation and lack of livelihood propelled Adivasis in Jharkhand to call for independence from Bihar and the Dikus, a term representing outsiders coming into the area for natural resource exploitation. Xavier Dias spoke of how B.I.R.S.A. was an acronym that played

on the name of Birsa Munda, who led a rebellion from 1890-1895 for Adivasi rule in Jharkhand[3]. Speaking specifically about Noamundi, where Omon is located, Dias said,

> I have lived and worked in Noamundi for the past thirty years and have been stunned by the developments that have taken place there. In the past 8 years, an average of 200 iron dumper trucks and 6000 outsiders have entered Noamundi. Some studies have shown that over 100 of these are said to be HIV positive. These dumper trucks are meant to ply on highways, not on the dirt track roads of villages. Many of the men who drive these trucks need to be serviced with alcohol and women, and one sees the rise of brothels in an area which had no history of this kind of activity at all.[4]

During my time at Omon, I asked some of the women to describe the political conditions of the community. Paanilahuri, an activist with Omon, told me, The education system is pretty bad here… there are also a lot of illnesses and people regularly die because of tuberculosis. There is no good government hospital here. Tata Steel (TISCO) has a hospital here but it is very expensive and doctors treat Adivasi people very badly. They tell them that they are dirty. No one around here lives beyond sixty years.[5] When asked about agriculture and general employment in the area, she replied, Agriculture does not really happen here because we are having major problems with water. This has led to a lot of women leaving agriculture and joining work as laborers in the mines even though they get less than a minimum wage. Also a lot of male migrant laborers have been molesting the local women. The iron dumper trucks are everywhere. They cause so much dust and pollution. Earlier people could roam around, but now a lot of people are getting scared.[6]

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[3] ISO8 2007.

[4] ISO8 2007

[5] ISO5 2007

[6] ISO5 2007

When I spoke to other activists at Omon, the lack of basic social services and the overwhelming prevalence of mining companies were things they alluded to as major issues. While I was there, I attended a small ceremony in the village to inaugurate the new ground-water facility put in by engineers from Tata Steel, as lack of potable water is a huge problem. As the "chief guest," the head of the Tata Steel plant told the community members not to despair about the water situation. However, it quickly became apparent to the activists and myself that this was a public relations operation. Two days after the ceremony was over and the photo opportunity had been capitalized upon, the ground-water facility broke down. Sona, one of the Omon members who collected money from the community for use of the facility, was still trying to get Tata Steel to take a look at the problem when I left.

Since the creation of Jharkhand in November 2000, resource exploitation has not only continued, but also India's move to export more iron from the region has meant increased exploitation in the mines and environmental degradation of the surrounding areas. At first optimistic about representation by "their own" people, local villagers quickly learned that tribal leaders were just as likely to be corrupted[7]. Then after multiple incidents of Jharkhandi Police opening fire on crowds of Adivasi protesters, the local population lost almost all faith in the state.

The activists at Omon believe Jharkhand is essentially a corporate state with the law and order machinery of the area being totally co-opted by the mining companies. Subject to intimidation and death threats on a regular basis by what they call the "iron mafia," this political climate makes it difficult for them to push for effective governance

[7] ISO1 2007

at a transnational or local level[8].

Methodology

In writing this dissertation, I have been motivated not only by my own intellectual curiosity but also by ideas of how engaged feminist scholarship can aid activist groups like Navdanya, DDS, and Omon in devising strategies that are more transformative and democratic. My hope is that such research and analysis can also assist and urge support for policies and practices that strengthen and promote the work that these activists are doing, often under difficult circumstances.

This section will proceed in five parts. First, I discuss the events that led to the development of my research question. Second, I describe my choice of immanent methodology and how it shaped my research question. Third, I discuss my concerns before going into the field, analyzing some of the ethical issues that other feminists have identified as existing between researchers and the communities they research. Fourth, I reveal the issues of gaining and retaining trust that actually arose once in the field. Fifth, I discuss the ways in which my commitment to ethical and politically relevant scholarship shapes not only how I interpret my findings but also how I give relevant feedback to the organizations I study.

Development of Research Interest

My research questions and interest in the topic of feminist environmentalism grew primarily out of two experiences. The first was my participation in a workshop held by

[8] ISO1 2007, ISO2 2007, ISO3 2007.

B.I.R.S.A in November 2003 (B.I.R.S.A Study Workshop 2003). I met Ajitha George (the head of Omon), and she told me about the program that she ran out of Noamundi on medicinal plants. She spoke about the problems that women were having gathering herbs to make their traditional medicines due to the increased deforestation in the area caused by the mining companies.

The workshop also talked about the environmental degradation that had been caused by the planting of World Bank financed eucalyptus tree plantations in the area. These eucalyptus trees grow incredibly fast in a very short period of time and ostensibly soak up carbon from the atmosphere at a fast rate. I learned that these plantations have many adverse impacts. First, they suck up groundwater at an enormously fast rate. Secondly, people in the area depend on herbs and other medicinal plants from the forests, and these monocultural eucalyptus tree plantations only allow for the survival of a few habitat generalists. A primary forest contains far more species.

The second experience that led me to this topic was my participation at the 2007 World Social Forum in Nairobi, Kenya. Rather than bringing issues of gender and climate change or sustainable development to the fore, the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), one of the biggest transnational feminist networks working on women and the environment, chose to organize a workshop on UN reform (World Social Forum 2007). After attending this and a number of meetings by prominent transnational environmental groups such as Friends of the Earth and the Dag Hammerskjold Foundation, I was struck by the lack of gender analysis of environmental concerns. It got me thinking that perhaps doing more research on the specific ways that grassroots women experience and talk about environmental harms could help bring these

issues to transnational spaces like the WSF, Feminist Dialogues, etc. With this in mind, I developed my research questions with the view that research can be part of praxis in the process of empowerment and transformation and might potentially be of use to women's movements. As feminist scholars point out though, this political commitment is best demonstrated when we make transparent in our research: "who we are writing for, how, and why?" (Nagar 2002, 179).

Immanent Critique

My reading of FPE literature in the pre-fieldwork stage of my research process led me to formulate a research question that was originally more concerned with material relations: *What are the critical analyses and strategies that women's environmental groups have used to examine neo-liberal policies and their impact on the environment?* However, when I started doing my fieldwork I found that although these groups were doing some interesting work on issues of economic globalization and its relationship to the environment, this did not constitute the focal point of their activism. For instance, while Omon had a conception of how the influx of mining companies was related to the rise in global demand for steel, they found it more important to gear their activism towards promoting and strengthening new models of local deliberation, governance, and decision-making. I came to realize fairly soon after arriving in the field that a better way to carry out my research would be to adopt a more immanent understanding of how the groups conceptualized their problems and justified the strategies they employed to deal with them. This proved to be a more beneficial approach intellectually and ethically.

Intellectually, I was able to develop a basis for criticism and assessment internally generated from the groups' own work. Rather than the top-down analysis that many scholars have adopted in relation to how environmental degradation affects poor communities (Parajuli 1996; Patel and Anders Riel Muller 2004), my approach did not rest on external assumptions or ideas of what their issue should be. Had I continued my research with a preconceived notion of what I would find, I would never have come across the insights regarding the groups' aims of participatory democracy and greater gains for women.

Ethically, the change to a more immanent methodology was important to my commitment to feminist research. I quickly realized that part of being respectful of the work that these activists were doing on the ground was being attentive to their own experiences and interpretations. By asking more general, open-ended questions to gather data, I let the women tell their stories. This allowed me to see the issues through their eyes, rather than analyzing their situations based on an overarching theory about women and the environment.

Ethical Reservations before Entering the Field

Before going into the field, I had some reservations with regards to what types of ethical dilemmas might occur. My understanding of feminist methodology made me acutely aware of some of the challenges involved in conducting fieldwork, particularly in the realm of negotiating power differences between the researcher and the researched. Diana Wolf, for instance, points to three contexts in which these issues arise. One pertains to the kinds of social power (class, race, gender, ethnicity, urban or rural backgrounds, etc.) that the researcher and the researched bring to the research situation.

Secondly, whose concepts, questions, and hypotheses are the focus of the research? And finally, she points to the power differentials that exist in writing up and representing research (Wolf 1996, 46)

Feminist scholar-activists have come up with some creative solutions for working through these problems of social power, representation, and privilege. Although it is impossible to completely eliminate such power differences, feminist scholar-activists have attempted to tie the production of knowledge more explicitly to the politics of social change. Brooke Ackerly, for instance, has suggestions for both scholars and activists. To scholars she suggests that they might come up with a research question guided by a future change in political, economic, social, or legal context of activism. She suggests to activists that in addition to influencing the topic of research, they may also suggest additional questions that would be helpful to their activism. She writes,

> Although the community may not need the information that the researcher was planning on gathering, activist organizations or the community may need other information and may ask the researcher to integrate the search for this information into the research design. Thus, in designing her research agenda in partnership with activists and non-government organizations (NGOs), the scholar may add questions that were not part of her original research design. However, these requests may ultimately yield important information for the research that the academic had not anticipated needing. But even if this information ends up not being useful to the scholar, it may be an important part of carrying out a research design that is respectful of and valuable to the research subjects. (Ackerly 2002, 4)

The explicit focus on having activists involved in formulating research questions, sharing in knowledge production, and in the dissemination of results can be difficult to implement in practice. However, by being attentive to these methodological concerns, researchers can use the distinctive powers they have on behalf of disadvantaged groups

(Ackerly 2001a; Ackerly 2001b; Ackerly 2003; Ackerly 2008; Ackerly, Stern, and True 2006; Nagar Richa 2003).

In the paragraphs below, I try to relay some of the challenges I experienced once in the field as well as how I negotiated them. In particular, I focus on two concerns familiar to anyone engaged in ethnographic/field research: gaining and retaining trust within the groups with which I worked.

Gaining and Retaining Trust in the Field

Spending time with these three organizations was crucial to my research. However, I found that the negative experiences these groups had had with previous researchers made them extremely reluctant to entertain my requests for time. These groups were already over-burdened and, as one of the DDS staff members told me, "Escorting researchers around takes time and energy away from our own work."[9] I explained that I would not be a burden to the group and would be more than happy to do any administrative/writing tasks in return for permission to do some participant observation, but the concerns still remained.

DDS similarly felt that researchers were a burden and simply ignored my email requests. I had worked with NGOs in India prior to coming to graduate school and had a network of people connected to these organizations. Tapping into this network, I was introduced through a friend to Professor Vinod Pavarala, a board member of DDS. After meeting me, he sent an email on my behalf to the head of DDS. When I met Mr. Suresh, the DDS officer in charge of their field operations, he conveyed to me that they felt

[9] ISD9 2008

hosting researchers was a big drain on their time and said that they really wouldn't even think of bringing me into their field office at this time had it not been for the intervention made by Prof. Pavarala.

I wrote to Omon in October of 2007 to ask if it was possible to spend some time with their organization. After getting no response, I called the head of the group in November. He was extremely guarded in our conversation and did not seem very open to having researchers spend time with the group. He said that researchers in the past had been a burden on the group's limited resources and time, but he would confer with the group and get back to me. I contacted after a few days, and he said that he had spoken with the group about my research project and that it was okay for me to come. He also told me that he had spoken with the head of the non-governmental organization that I previously worked for and seemed reassured that I was a "well-intentioned researcher."

Although these groups gave me permission to spend time with them, they did so with some safeguards. DDS, for instance, was very permission-focused with me. I needed to get permission to sit in on meetings and also had to get permission from the field officer to talk to any of the women. The women themselves seemed very aware of this provision. Whenever I sat down with my translator to talk to a couple of women, the first thing they would ask is if we had "gotten permission from sir" (the "sir" they are referring to is Mr. Suresh, the officer in charge of the field office).

He would then come and explain to them in their regional language, Telegu, my research topic and what kinds of questions I would be asking. This definitely raised concerns about the candidness of the responses I was getting from the women. When I asked one of the women leaders who worked with DDS why I needed to get permission

to speak to anyone, she said that it was because the women tended to go off on tangents sometimes and they wanted to "lightly prime them" to make sure that their responses weren't distracting to me and my research (Personal conversations with Pulamma). My sense, however, was that this was being done so that the activists wouldn't say anything that could be seen as being harmful to the interests of the organization. While it appears that there was some anxiety regarding whether I would go back and write things that were "harmful" to the group, there also seemed to be some anxiety regarding the diverse views of the group members themselves. The women in the group wanted to speak on their own behalf rather than have people from the outside come in and represent them.[10]

They did this, for example, through their community media center, where they produce documentaries about organic farming and DDS in general. After undergoing training workshops, the women are able to make these documentaries on their own. The women explained to me that they got sick of people coming from outside, staying for a few days, and documenting their lives. They wanted to be in charge of their own identities. Often too shy to speak openly in front of the camera with foreign filmmakers, the village women were much more candid when the DDS women came to film them.[11] However, I found that it was the same 5 or 6 women being asked, on camera and off, to tell the "story of DDS." Furthermore, I found in my own interviews that it was difficult to get them off the talking points that they seem to have perfected in their documentaries.

B.I.R.S.A., the larger organization out of which Omon works, also had some mechanisms in place which they felt might help protect them. Upon my arrival at their

[10] ISD10 2008

[11] ISD4 2008, ISD6 2008

office, I found that I would have to sign a form stipulating that a) the information I collected would not be used for commercial or any form of profit; b) this information would not be used against victims of social injustice; c) B.I.R.S.A would be given credit as a source for this information; and d) if the information is used for a publication, research thesis, article, or any public document, a copy will be made available to B.I.R.S.A. (B.I.R.S.A Research Statement).

When I asked the head of the organization why they did this, Xavier Dias stated that in his 33 years with B.I.R.S.A., not a single person of the 100 researchers he had helped ever sent back the product of their research.[12] The organization would have perhaps benefited from even a one-page summary of their main findings, but they found that most researchers just disappeared and would never email/call again. He informed me of three specific instances that stood out.

After helping an Italian student for about 4 years with her dissertation research in a small village of Jharkhand, the researcher completed her Ph.D. and returned to Jharkhand a few years later as the World Bank regional coordinator. She proceeded to use all the contacts B.I.R.S.A. had helped her make to push the World Bank agenda in the region, something contrary to the group's mission.

There were also some French students who came to the house of Mr. Dias in Duccasai Village in 1997. Because there was no photocopy machine in the village, they took a heap of data from his house to a nearby town and said they would return it as soon as they were done. The data never returned, and he never heard back from these students.

The organization also received a visit from a photojournalist from the United

[12] ISO8 2007

Kingdom who had received a large grant to take photos around the theme of "Energy and Climate Change." The journalist used the organization's vehicles and, through their organization, was given access and protection to roam around and take photos in the areas of Jharkhand where the Naxalites (Indian Maoist Rebels) are politically active and carrying out acts of violence against state institutions. When he was done taking photos, he commanded the staff of the organization to get his flight tickets moved up. At that moment in time, a lot of the staff were busy trying to deal with a tragedy elsewhere which involved the deaths of many Adivasi/indigenous people. Not only did he show little interest in the issue, but also was insistent that his airline work be done first, requesting that an office car take him to the airport. He has consistently refused to send back copies of the photos B.I.R.S.A. helped him take.

In detailing these instances, my primary goal is not simply to reveal how ethically insensitive researchers can harm future activist-research collaborations, but also to point out how subaltern groups themselves are building institutional mechanisms to resist their exploitation. This becomes very important in a political climate where women's groups are battling for survival and where academic institutions are not predisposed to speak to their struggles.

However, while I was conducting my own research on DDS, I found myself in the awkward position of potentially being the very same "insensitive researcher." Everyone at DDS except for a few people at the top spoke Telegu, which is the regional language in Andhra Pradesh. Telegu has no similarity with the Indian language Hindi which I know best, and in order to do my fieldwork I needed a translator. Having a very difficult time trying to persuade anyone to come spend time with me in the village, I did finally get

introduced through an acquaintance to a person who lived in the area where the organization was housed. Her name was Dimple, and she agreed to accompany me to the organization during the day and sit with me during the meetings to do simultaneous translation. I explained that we were meant to be participant observers, but I was not sure she adequately grasped the concept. She also did not seem particularly interested in the work that the group did (despite having lived there for most of her life, she had no idea what the organization's work was geared towards).

On our first day together, we attended a women's health meeting (Deccan Development Society Women's Health Meeting 2008). The meeting was held so that women could share some of the herbal remedies they had prepared. The moderator went around the room and asked the women to talk about what diseases they had treated with ayurvedic/herbal medicines and what the outcome had been. For instance, had the patient recovered or not?

One of the DDS women started talking, while others in the room intently listen to her. My translator however started arguing with her in Telegu and shaking her head. It turns out that the woman was a mid-wife trained by DDS. She had anticipated some problems with the delivery of a pregnant woman she was treating and had decided to take her to the government hospital. At the government hospital she found that nurses were slapping and beating the women while they were giving birth to prevent them from shouting/crying out. The midwife was disturbed by this and said that she never hit or slapped women while they were giving birth.

My translator was arguing back, defending the nurses. According to her, the nurses had to go through at least 150 deliveries a day and they were under a lot of

pressure. She told me confidently in English that "these" women were not educated and that with their first child they didn't know they were supposed to push instead of wasting their energy crying and shouting.

This was really disturbing and offensive to me on many different levels, but I didn't want to get into a big debate with Dimple about the ethics of it at that moment. I explained our role once more and told her not to argue with the women during the meeting. I found that although she did quiet down during the meetings, I continued to have serious misgivings about her general attitude. I made sure her contact with the women in the group was kept to a minimum. And although Dimple was not a good research assistant, I did think that it was a good opportunity for her to learn something about the organization and the women who participated within it.

For instance, although initially when I started asking the women questions about patenting of seeds and multinational corporations, Dimple would turn to me and say things like “I don't think you should ask these women questions like this because they are from the village - what will they know? I mean I live in the town and I don't know anything about this” (Personal conversations with Dimple). While this response was aggravating to me, I just thanked her for sharing her concerns and asked her to ask the question anyways. I could tell that she was very impressed by the fact that not only did these women know about things like the patenting of seeds, but also were vehement in their opposition and articulate about the alternatives that were needed. Additionally, I could tell that the DDS women were thrilled to know something about things that my translator did not. By the third or fourth day, Dimple was pretty impressed by the women

in DDS and had built a really friendly rapport with them. At the end of our time, she even asked the coordinator how one goes about joining an organization like DDS.

I think that if Dimple had continued to behave in an irresponsible way, I would have had to let her go. Although this would have meant leaving the organization as well, it would have been better than destroying my relationship with the group. And while I am happy and relieved that she developed a good relationship with the women and was interested in exploring work opportunities, I am unsure whether her moving to a place of respect was particularly transformative. Her respect seemed contingent upon the women themselves conforming to certain elite traits that were important to her – for instance, ability to travel, knowledge of technical issues, etc.

Looking back on these issues, I now realize the importance of my feminist research ethic (Ackerly and True 2010). Although I tried to prepare myself for the different kinds of ethical dilemmas that might arise during fieldwork, I often found myself at a loss on how to effectively navigate the problems I encountered. Reminding me why and for whom I was carrying out this work, my commitment to a feminist research ethic kept me grounded and proved to be a useful device in the field.

Responsibilities of Engaged Scholarship

While I found a methodology that encouraged me to see through these women's eyes, part of employing an immanent critique required me to then offer a critical and constructive perspective of what I saw. During the process of my writing, I have felt the painful contradictions of this position. Despite the difficulties I had getting organizations to let me spend time with them, once I was there I was greeted with an extraordinary

amount of warmth and kindness. Is criticism of their life's work an appropriate way to repay their kindness, even if it is an engaged criticism? How would they be able to trust me again? These are questions that I continue to grapple with, and engagement with these groups has enabled me to see that the theoretical concerns I address have to be grounded and relevant to people's lives.

Part of this is acknowledging that I'm not merely interested in producing some theoretical breakthrough that will be recognized and rewarded within academe. Part of my responsibility as an ethical feminist researcher is to link my critical research with goals that are important to the activists that I spent time with. As I will explicate some of the practical implications of my research in the conclusion of this dissertation, I will continue long after this dissertation to explore ways in which research can enhance the work of social justice activists.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I treat the three organizations I research – Navdanya, DDS, and Omon – as cases studies of the larger field of women's environmental activism. In order to contribute to the rich insights developed by scholars in the field of Feminist Political Ecology, I employ an immanent method to study these three cases. I find the common threads of participatory democracy and women-focused activism in their work. I argue that although these groups do much toward achieving their goals, they also adopt some paradoxical strategies counter to such aims. In order to make this argument, in the chapters below I explicate how the groups conceptualize their problems and analyze the strategies they use to deal with them.

The purpose of this dissertation is to reveal through an immanent critique the paradoxical strategies these groups employ. This approach strengthens FPE scholarship by bringing attention to political issues at play in these activists' work and by introducing a methodological innovation into the work these scholars do. It also serves to provide activists with some practical suggestions on ways in which they can enhance the efficacy of their activism.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Research on women and the environment has come a very long way. The field is no longer dominated by old debates on whether the earth is our mother goddess or whether women are inherently closer to nature than men (Adams 1993; Diamond and Orenstein 1990; Ortner 1974; Plant 1989; Plumwood 1993). The field is now largely activist-informed and materially focused (Agarwal 1992; Agarwal 1997; Agarwal 2003; Jackson 1993; Jackson 1995; Jackson and Pearson 1998; Leach 2007; McFague 2008; Sachs 1997; Seager 1993; Seager 1996; Seager 2003; Warren 1996; Warren and Erkal 1997). In the sections below, I attempt to trace the important features of the field of feminist environmentalism and give an account of how we got to this point.

I will be analyzing the two main feminist approaches to studying women and the environment: ecofeminism (based on value dualisms, historical connections, and spiritual connections) and materialist conceptions of women and the environment (feminist environmentalism, Feminist Political Ecology [FPE], and Gender, Environment, and Development [GED]). These theoretical frameworks have collectively generated the most important and politically prescient insights for the feminist environmental movement and have had a significant impact on moving the field forward.

I begin this chapter by briefly analyzing the contributions as well as the limitations of ecofeminist literature. Much of the early literature in the field points to women's "special" relationship with the environment, with many theorists taking a

different stance on how to actually understand this "special" relationship. I will briefly discuss the three most well recognized early theorizations of this connection: value dualisms, historical connection, and spiritual connections. I end the section with a discussion of more recent literature in the field of ecofeminism. This literature has tried to respond to criticisms that have been levied against the field by reconceptualizing the interrelationships between women and nature in more materialist ways which can be seen most prominently in the field of feminist ecotheology.

The second section discusses work that scholars have done concerning connections between women and the environment based solely on material grounds. I show that all three analytical perspectives have an integrated understanding of women's oppression as rooted in structural and material inequalities. The field of FPE, however, has taken these concerns much farther than feminist environmentalism and GED, in that it has produced an analytical framework that carves out insights from political ecologists, feminist environmentalists, and grassroots women's activism.

I argue that, despite the theoretical insights Feminist Political Ecology has generated for feminist environmentalism, the methodology employed by FPE scholars does not enable them to see the full scope of work women's environmental activists do on political issues. An examination of these strategies enables us to see the kind of efforts activists are making to transform government policies, enhance gender equity, and built democratic political institutions. It also gives us some important practical insights on how to increase political opportunities for activist groups.

Additionally, while the FPE literature focuses on interrogating romantic essentialisms of women in their academic analysis, there is less focus on how groups

employ strategic essentialisms when it comes to the category of women and nature. It is important to analyze these strategic essentialisms as it might lead activists to perpetuate systems of domination and oppression.

Ecofeminist Theory

Ecofeminism in the United States can be traced back to the mid-1970s.[13] Growing primarily out of the antimilitarist movement of the late 1970s and '80s, it drew heavily on the peace movement's analysis of the connections between militarism, classism, racism, sexism, and environmental destruction. It also melded ideas from the green movement concerning the reliance of humanity on the natural world (Sturgeon 1997). As Joni Seager writes, "Environmentalists provided baseline insights into the interdependence of human life and planet life and offered a systems analysis of the ways ecological destruction cascaded through intertwined social and ecological webs. Feminists honed these understandings with analyses of the ways the construction of social power, in its ineluctably gendered dimensions, produced those conditions of ecological threat" (Seager 2003, 947).

The precise connection between women and nature is a highly contentious issue within ecofeminism. As ecofeminist philosopher Karen Warren writes,

> The varieties of ecofeminism reflect not only the differences in the analysis of the women/nature connection, but also differences on such fundamental matters as the nature of and the solutions to women's oppression, the theory of human nature, and the conceptions of freedom, equality, epistemology, on which various feminist theories depend. (Warren 1987, 4)

[13] The term ecofeminism was coined by the French feminist, Francois d'Eaubonne in her book Feminism ou La Mort (Eaubonne 1974).

I highlight below some of the early formulations of the women-environment connection and discuss how ecofeminists have responded to certain criticisms. While the first two formulations (conceptual connections and historical connections) have largely been debunked, the third (feminist ecotheology) still retains some of its currency in contemporary discourse.

Conceptual Connections between Women and Nature

This approach argues that the causal links between the dominations of women and nature is located in value dualisms. Most of the ecofeminists who adopted this approach followed radical feminists in identifying western patriarchy as the main source of global ecological destruction. Sherry Ortner was one of the first feminists to examine the dualistic ideas of women being aligned with nature and men with culture. She linked this to a host of binary structures such as women being more caring and emotional and men being more rational and competitive (Ortner 1974).

In the context of a bourgeoning environmental movement in the '80s and '90s, this belief led some feminist scholars to regard certain personality traits of women as innate. They argue that because it is women who do most of the caring work that sustains human life, they assume a sense of compassion towards their environment which leads them to take action to preserve and repair it (Merchant 1996; Mies 1993; Salleh 1997).

For instance, Ariel Salleh conflates the feminism in "ecofeminism" with "womanism." She defines womanism as a "transvaluation of ‘feminine’ experiences and, in particular, the relational sensibility often gaining in mothering labors" (Salleh 1997,

104). At various points in her work she reduces the category of "female" to the category of "mother," arguing for the moral superiority of the latter.

In contrast to views that try to freeze women into particular identity categories, scholars like Janet Biehl have made the case that stereotypes promoting women as nurturers/caregivers have often been used to oppress women and create obstacles to their entry into the workforce (Biehl 1991, 12). Biehl points out that the ecofeminist images put forth by scholars such as Mary Mellor and Ariel Salleh have tended to restrict rather than expand the full range of women's human abilities and potential.

Towards the latter half of the 1980s, U.S. ecofeminists started producing literature on Native American and "Third World Women" as examples of ecofeminist practice. This literature privileges indigenous women as the "ultimate ecofeminists." In works like Rebecca Plant's *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* and Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein's *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, Native American women are held up as exemplars of feminist ecology.

For these and other ecofeminists the global movements that have had the most resonance are the Chipko Movement and the Green Belt Movement. Much of the information that was transmitted about the Chipko Movement was done via scholarship produced by Vandana Shiva, the Director of the New Delhi based Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Natural Resource Policy. Her book titled *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* discusses the "Chipko Movement[14]" in northern India and the women who were at the forefront in saving the forests from commercial loggers. Shiva's work used many of the ecofeminist ideas above to argue that Indian women have

[14] The Chipko movement used Gandhian methods of satyagraha and non-violent resistance to stop the felling of trees. Women would form circles and hug the trees to prevent the logging.

an inherent connection to nature and that this connection is what propels them to risk their lives to protect the forests.

In other work, Shiva analyzes and gives reasons for the failure of the "Green Revolution" in the Third World, in particular the pernicious effect it had on rural women. She argues that the Green Revolution was a symptom of the patriarchal capitalist project of development, which she calls "maldevelopment." Shiva writes,

> With the violation of nature is linked the violation and marginalization of women, especially in the Third World. Women produce and reproduce life not merely biologically, but also through their social role in providing sustenance. All ecological societies of forest-dwellers and peasants, whose life is organized on the principle of sustainability and the reproduction of life in all its richness, also embody the feminine principle. Historically, however, when such societies have been colonized and broken up the men have usually started to participate in life-destroying activities or have had to migrate; the women meanwhile, usually continue to be linked to life and nature through their role as providers of sustenance, food and water. The privileged access of women to the sustaining principle thus has had a historical and cultural, and not merely a biological, basis. (Shiva 1988, 42)

In her work she alludes to the "feminine principle" which she deems as necessary to keeping Indian culture in balance with nature. She insists that the idea of a "feminine principle" is not some outdated notion of matriarchy but the idea of gender complementarity in sexual divisions of labor. With regards to this "feminine principle," Shiva writes,

> In this non-gender based philosophy the feminine principle is not exclusively embodied in women, but is the principle of activity and creativity in nature, women and men. One cannot really distinguish the masculine from the feminine, person from nature, Purusha from Prakriti. Though distinct, they remain inseparable in dialectical unity, as two aspects of one being. The recovery of the feminine principle is thus associated with the non-patriarchal, non-gendered category of creative non-violence, or 'creative power in peaceful form,' as Tagore stated in his prayer to the tree. (Shiva 1988, 52)

The above paragraphs highlight the essentialist nature of her writing, much of which would come under heavy criticism. However, this work was incredibly important in challenging the hegemony of scientific knowledge dominated by men. Shiva's work advanced the idea that uneducated women could have a better understanding of environmental protection than scientists and policymakers. Her work was also important in promoting the idea of a "global sisterhood" around environmental issues which would bridge cultural gaps in the women's movement.

While many of these hopes did not come to fruition, a great deal of Shiva's earlier work supported the claims of culturally essentialist ecofeminists in the global North. In fact, her examination of the Chipko Movement in particular is used as an exemplar for Western feminists who wish to paint Third World women as "natural environmentalists" or "ultimate ecofeminists," perpetuating the image of women as being wholly integrated into their natural habitats.

Historical Connections between Women and Nature

Other women-nature connections have been established on the basis of history. Feminist scholars such as Riane Eisler have pointed to the matrilineal nature of societies before 4500 B.C. as being relatively at peace with nature. This ended with the invasion of Indo-European societies by Eurasian nomadic tribes (Eisler 1990, 29). Other scholars have traced these historical connections back to Greek philosophy and the rationalist traditions. More contemporary analyses of history focus on the scientific revolutions of the 16th and 17th centuries. They argue that this ushered in an era of reductionist and

mechanistic science which led to unhindered industrial expansion and the subordination of women (Merchant 1980). Carolyn Merchant writes,

> As Western culture became increasingly mechanized during the 1600s, a female nurturing earth and virgin earth spirit were subdued by the machine. The change in controlling imagery was directly related to changes in human attitudes and behavior towards the earth. Whereas the older nurturing earth image can be viewed as a cultural constraint restricting the types of socially and morally sanctioned human actions allowable with respect to the earth, the new images of mastery and domination functioned as cultural sanctions for the denudation of nature. (Merchant 2006, 417)

The common thread in these analyses is to draw parallels between the violence done to the land and the violence done to women, as well as to argue that women were fighting against exploitative developments using their inherent connection to nature. Such conclusions tend to view women as a largely undifferentiated category and assume that all women have a similar understanding of the environment based on their affinity to nature. Feminists particularly in the global South have argued that ecofeminism's emphasis on issues of patriarchy obfuscates issues of racism, imperialism, and capitalism and the role that they play in gender oppression and ecological destruction.

While ecofeminism initially started as an approach that articulated connections between women and the environment, it has gradually expanded to include the intersections of class and race. As Rosemary Ruether writes,

> Ecofeminist hopes for an alternative society calls for a double conversion or transformation. Social hierarchies of men over women, white elites over subordinated classes and races, need to be transformed into egalitarian societies which recognize the fullness of humanity of each human person. But if greater racial and gender equality is not to be mere tokenism which does not change the deep hierarchies of wealth and power of the few over the many, there must be both a major restructuring of the relations of human groups to each other and a transformation of the relation between humans and the nonhuman world. Humans need to recognize that they are one species among others within the ecosystems of earth. Humans need to embed their systems of production, consumption, and

> waste within the ways that nature sustains itself in a way that recognizes their intimate partnership with nonhuman communities. (Ruether 2005, 94)

Spiritual Connections between Women and Nature

In 1967 Lynn White, a medieval historian, published a germinal article entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." In this article, White argued that Christian religion had played a major role in causing disregard for nature in Western civilization. He specifically cites the passage in Genesis 1:26, "Let us create man in our image, after our likeness and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over birds of the air and over the cattle and over the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth," as the source of a claim to unbridled mastery of humanity over nature that is the root of the ecological crisis (White 1967). Many scholars have tended to agree with White's analysis and have consistently adopted the view that it was impossible to "Green" the Bible.

However, in the last decades of the 20th century we have seen not only the rise of evangelical environmentalism but also a host of other world religions beginning to grapple with the possible harm that their traditions may have caused to the environment. They have also begun to search the positive elements in their traditions for an ecologically affirming spirituality and practice.

One can see this in statements by cardinals who are planting trees to restore an ancient forest on denuded stretches of land to offset carbon emissions at the Vatican (Rosenthal 2007). Roger Gottlieb writes of how, in the Spring of 2005, evangelical leaders representing groups with some 30 million members put forth ideas on how to change U.S. policy on global warming. They called on members of the Senate and House

of Representatives of the Bush administration to engage in a dialogue about these issues. Gottlieb writes, "Religion is now a leading voice telling us to respect the earth, love our nonhuman as well as human neighbors, and think deeply about our social policies and economic priorities. Religions now offer Earth Day prayers, critical comments on the environmental effects of World Bank loans, cautions about the dangers of genetic engineering, and Sunday school lessons about how Christians should respond to environmentally induced asthma" (Gottlieb 2006, 9).

Scholars such as Starhawk, Charlene Spretnak, and Carol Christ are examples of early spiritual ecofeminists. These ecofeminists see the problem of ecological destruction not only as a social, economic, and technological problem but also a spiritual one. Writing in this vein, Charlene Spretnak argues that certain biological traits connected to being a woman enables the mysteries of nature to be unlocked. She writes,

> The earth-body and the womb body run on cosmological time. Just as the flow of earth's life-giving waters follows lunar rhythms, so too follow the tides of a woman's womb. No culture has failed to notice these connections or the related feats of elemental power: that the female can grow both sexes from her flesh and transform food into milk for them, and that the earth cyclically produces vast bounty and intricate dynamics of the biosphere that allow life. Cultural responses to the physical connections between nature and the female range from respect and honor to fear, resentment and denigration. Whatever the response, it is elaborate constructed over time and plays a primal, informing role in the evolution of a society's worldview. (Spretnak 1993, 181)

Others have pointed to the extreme anthropocentrism and andocentrism that exists in religion and offer alternative spiritual symbols (for example – Gaia and goddess symbols). They have asked how hierarchies of gender in religion and culture have translated into hierarchies of humans in nature and argue for a return to more traditional views that stress the interconnected nature of life (Christ 1995; Christ 1997; Starhawk 1979).

In recent times, more comprehensive work has been done by ecofeminists to link corporate globalization and its challenges to both ecofeminism and interfaith ecological theology. Although they introduce socio-economic concerns into their frameworks, scholars such as Sally McFague still ascribe to the idea that, at an ideological level, women are closer to nature and more in touch with their bodies, emotions, and the natural world (Eaton 2003; Eaton 2005; McFague 1993; McFague 1995; McFague 1997; Ruether 1996; Ruether 2003; Ruether 2005).

Rosemary Ruether in her 2005 book *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions* dedicates a chapter to the "Greening of World Religions." In the introduction to the book, she examines some of the problems that have hampered world religions from taking up the issue of women and the environment. She argues that "most of these religions have patterns that justify the domination of women, both in the religious practices and in society. Hierarchies over lower-class and slave people and marginalized races are also factors in many of the world's religions. From an ecofeminist and ecojustice perspective it is essential for the religions to deal with this interface between domination of nature and social domination" (Ruether 2005, xi).

A second problem she highlights is the lack of real connection between religious theory and practice. Ruether highlights two major differences she sees in the production of work by Southern feminists and Northern feminists with regards to the work being done in the field of feminist religious environmentalism. The first being that women from Asia, Africa, and Latin America are much more likely to keep material concerns in the foreground of their analysis and understand that the basis for domination of women and nature is impoverishment. The second is that these women from the global South are

interested in recovering patterns of spirituality from their own indigenous roots, a story that has been broken by colonialism and Christianization but is still present (Ruether 1996).

Grassroots women's movements working on these issues have been very attentive to the link between the hierarchies of gender in religion and culture and the hierarchies of humans over nature. For example, in 1991 a group of Latin American women began a group called "Con-spirando" (a play on words meaning "breathing with" instead of "conspiring against"). This group was marked by a feminist perspective and sought spirituality and a theology that would be more adequate for women. They have been instrumental in unmasking some aspects of theological violence toward women, renaming and connecting with the sacred, offering an embodied theology, and bringing an ecofeminist perspective to theology. They have also made real connections between religious theory and practice. They have not restricted themselves to only talking about theories of the sacredness of rivers and earth, but have translated these into promoting ethical practices on the ground. These practices include engaging with struggles to stop the pollution and contamination of rivers and deforestation of forests and mountains (Gebara 2003; Ress 2003).

Materialist Conceptions of the Women-Environment Connection

As shown in the sections above, there have been some moves within ecofeminism to adopt a more materialist analysis of the connection between women and the environment. These have carried different labels such as feminist environmentalism (Agarwal 1992), Feminist Political Ecology (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari

1996), and Gender, Environment, and Development (GED). Feminist environmentalism emphasizes material conceptions of gender-environment relations and their connections with particular ideological conceptions. Drawing on these and broader works within political ecology, FPE draws particular attention to issues of gendered knowledge, resource access and control, and the engagement between local and global issues. The field of GED applies the perspectives of gendered analysis in the environmental domain. These perspectives emerge from an understanding of gender relations and social context as being dynamic, challenging the notion that women have a predetermined special relationship with the environment.

Discussing each in greater detail in this section, I focus at length on the framework of Feminist Political Ecology in order to highlight its extensive work on centering issues of social equality and gender justice that are at stake in conflicts over natural resources. I show that although gendered asymmetries are crucial in Feminist Political Ecology's analysis, they tend to be primarily viewed through a materialist lens. I argue that adding an immanent methodology to the work that FPE scholars are doing can enhance this scholarship in two ways. First, it can help make visible struggles that groups are waging which are not necessarily over natural resources or material concerns. Second, it can help us understand more effectively the political representations that women's movements generate in their activism, enabling FPE to offer a greater analytical purchase on the work done by grassroots movements and an understanding of the potential pitfalls in adopting certain essentialized images.

Feminist Environmentalism

As shown above, conceptualizing the relationship between women and nature as an essential one has helped us see the connections between environmental degradation and classism. However, the essentialism in ecofeminist writings on women and the environment has made it untenable to many scholars both in the global North and South. In the North, essential conceptualizations of women were critiqued by women of color who argued that issues of race, class, and gender were much more salient in shaping their life experiences (Taylor 1997).

Scholars writing from a Marxist perspective were also critical of the claims advanced by some ecofeminists. Cecile Jackson was particularly critical of the way that Northern ecofeminists used the category of "Third World Woman" as being the embodiment of the ultimate ecofeminist. She argued against the ecofeminist assumption of women being natural promoters of environmental sustainability and the idea that the mere presence of women in an environmental movement made it a feminist movement. She points out that movements such as the Chipko and the Green Belt Movement (tree-planting movement started in Kenya by Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Waangari Maathai) are hardly ever interrogated to discern their feminist character. Jackson writes,

> There is the need, then, to unpack the idea that women's 'responsibilities' make them environmentally friendly. The responsibility to provide firewood for cooking a meal may lead a woman, when faced with a firewood shortage, to plant a tree but it may also lead her to pull up a wooden fence and burn it, to argue for the purchase of a fuel efficient stove, to insist on the purchase of charcoal, to delegate fuel wood collection to a younger woman in the household or any number of alternate responses. (Jackson 1993, 412)

The problem that Jackson is dealing with appears to be that of the propensity within ecofeminism to consider any action by women that can be described as

"environmental" to be an example of ecofeminism, even when the actors who engage in these activities hold no feminist, environmental intention. Her whole intellectual and political project is to make visible the problems that women identify and how they are understood. She seeks to interrogate the meanings that surround gendered discourses on women and the environment.

In India, Bina Agarwal drew on her own fieldwork on women and fuel wood issues in the Himalayas to highlight some of the problematic aspects of ecofeminist arguments. First, she argues that, failing to differentiate among women by class, race, ethnicity, etc., ecofeminist theory posits "woman" as a unitary category, ignoring other forms of oppression that also impinge critically on women's lives. Second, Agarwal argues that ecofeminist theory locates the domination of women and nature almost solely in ideology, neglecting the ways in which economic advantage and political power structure this relationship. Third, she argues that ecofeminist theory does not give a historical account of the social, economic, and political structures in which these problems are produced and transformed. It also does not give an account of how dominant groups are able to get ideological shifts in their favor in the first place. Lastly, Agarwal argues that "those strands of ecofeminism that trace the connection between women and nature to biology may be seen as adhering to a form of essentialism… Such a formulation flies in the face of wide-ranging evidence that concepts of nature, culture, gender and so on, are historically and socially constructed and vary across and within cultures and time periods" (Agarwal 1992, 125-126).

Agarwal's work has been a significant contribution to debates around gender and the environment. Although she also argues that rural women's environmental knowledge

is important, she bases her claim on material practices such as men's and women's work and land ownership practices. This focus on material conditions has made visible how certain kinds of environmental problems are produced and how these problems make women's lives more difficult by increasing their household labor.

Agarwal proposes an alternative theoretical framework to examine the relationship between women and the environment which she named "feminist environmentalism." In this, she stressed that the relationship of each sex with nature needs to be understood in its specific forms of interaction with the environment, i.e., their material reality. She argues that scholars should view this interaction through "a given gender and class (/caste/race) organization of production, reproductive and distribution." This approach would entail engaging with groups that have the primary control of resources and would transform notions of gender and division of work and resources between the genders (Agarwal 1992, 127).

Bina Agarwal's sophisticated theoretical and empirical analysis of the material conditions that mediate women's social experiences with the environment has done a great deal in bringing legitimacy back to the field of feminist environmental studies. Furthermore, many of the ideas developed by her and other scholars writing in a similar vein has led to the articulation of a new framework on feminist environmentalism, Feminist Political Ecology.

This material critique was echoed by other scholars working in Africa and Latin America. For instance, Celia Nyamweru, a researcher looking at local environmental movements in Kenya, spent two field seasons in Kilifi and Kawale Districts in 1996 and 1997. She examined the uses made of the environment by men and women of Mijikenda

(a predominantly farming people), the opinions they expressed about the value of the environment, and the changes that have occurred in their lifetimes. She found that the relationship of Mijikenda women to the kaya forests does not follow the archetypical prototype described by Shiva, but instead that *both* men and women extract forest products in an unsustainable way. She found that women collect firewood from the kaya forests and men cut building poles, even though they recognize the sacred and cultural significance of these forests (Nyamweru 2003).

These criticisms were instrumental in pushing for a new theoretical approach to the study of women and the environment, one that puts social justice issues and materialist concerns at the center of its analysis.

Feminist Political Ecology

Building on the work done in the field of ecofeminism and feminist environmentalism, scholars such as Dianne Rocheleau, Barbara Thomas-Slayer, and Esther Wangari have laid out what they saw as the key issues emerging from feminist theorizing on gender and the environment and recent political ecology work. The first to provide a coherent analytical framework to the FPE approach, their framework joins three critical themes: first, gendered knowledge; second, gendered environmental rights and responsibilities; and third, gendered environmental politics and grassroots activism (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996).

The first theme, gendered knowledge, focuses on how gender, science, and the environment converge in academic and political discourse, as well as in everyday life. Within a variety of cases of political and environmental struggles, they examine what the

gender implications of the separation of work and knowledge / science and practice mean for the gendered science of survival in rural as well as industrial contexts. They point out that men often have more access to agro forestry extension workers and knowledge associated with science while women have experiential knowledge which has been gained from their role as household subsistence providers. They write, "Women's multiple role as producers, reproducers, and 'consumers' have required women to develop and maintain their integrative abilities to deal with complex systems of household, community, and landscape and have often brought them into conflict with specialized sciences that focus on only one of these domains. The conflict revolves around the separation of domains of knowledge, as well as the separation of knowing and doing, and of 'formal' and 'informal' knowledge" (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996, 8).

The second theme, gendered environmental rights and responsibilities, explores the different political contexts under which women are denied control and rights over resources. They understand these rights and responsibilities as applying to productive resources (land, water, trees, animals, etc.) or to the quality of the environment. These categories reflect women's and men's often distinct rights and responsibilities in production (subsistence and commercial), their rights and responsibilities to create or maintain a healthy biophysical environment, and their rights and responsibilities to determine the quality of life and the nature of environment. For example, agrarian reforms in developing countries such as India and Kenya have legally distributed land only to male head of households, adversely impacting on women's de facto claims to land use rights and control over land (Chant and Radcliffe 1992).

The third theme, gendered environmental politics and grassroots activism, examines environmental movements with a special focus on the role of women within them. They point out how women have been empowered through struggles for control of natural resources. Rocheleau et al. write,

> Given the involvement of women in collective action around the world, there are critical linkages between global environmental and economic processes and the recent surge in women's participation in public fora, particularly in relation to ecological and economic concerns. This surge in women's activism is a response to actual changes in local environmental conditions as well as to discursive shifts toward "sustainable development" in national and international policy circles…. Women are beginning to redefine their identities, and the meaning of gender, through expressions of human agency and collective action emphasizing struggle, resistance, and cooperation. In so doing, they have also begun to redefine environmental issues to include women's knowledge, experience and interests. While this is a worldwide phenomenon, the process and results in any one place reflect historical, social and geographical specificity. (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996, 15)

In each of the cases Rocheleau et al. analyzed, they found that people have acted in response to some combination of threats to health, livelihood, quality of life, and social justice. For example, the rubber tapper union in Brazil addressed livelihood, justice, and quality of life issues, all related to forest protection and management (Campbell 1996). In Kenya, women's environmental interests rested on access to land, as well as other forms of capital and resources for livelihood security in both long and short-term contexts (Rocheleau and Edmunds 1997).

Analyzing women's environmental struggles around the world, other scholars have used the Feminist Political Ecology approach to dispel Neo-Malthusian myths about environmental degradation, population, and security. For example, Lucy Jarosz uses an FPE approach to analyze Eko Okoko's article on women and environmental change in

the Niger Delta. In the primary article, Okoko interviews 100 Ibeno women who are the heads of their households and later argues that their vulnerability is a result of an interconnected chain of events: pollution from oil extraction reduces farm and fish yields and leads to male outmigration, then leading to female-headed households who rely on increased forest use for survival (Okoko 1999, 375). Jarosz's commentary adds another layer of analysis pertaining to the population debates. Using Okoko's analysis, she states,

> Okoko provides important evidence demonstrating that land shortage and resource pressures are not the result of population growth in sub-Saharan Africa. Rather than population pressure causing resource degradation, the case pivots upon narratives of the globalization of energy extraction and demand and the complicated relationship between the Nigerian state and its regional subjects/citizens who demand a share of the oil wealth and accountability for environmental destruction. (Jarosz 1999, 392)

In summary, Feminist Political Ecology does a good job of bringing activist issues to the foreground and taking empirical data seriously in order to demonstrate how gender structures access to particular types of knowledge, space, and resources.

In this dissertation I argue that, in addition to the insights this literature has generated on feminist environmentalism, the current literature can be enhanced by adopting an immanent methodological approach. This would enable FPE scholars to focus on the strategies employed by women to combat the problems they face at local and global levels. An analysis of these strategies enables us to see what kinds of spaces are being created for democratic participation in national and global policy processes, as well as how activists are building networks at national, regional, and international levels.

Secondly, although FPE theorists are constantly examining the relationships between men and women, discussion of gender often tends to be focused solely on women. Consequently, this can lead to replication of the same problematic essentialized nature of women generated in ecofeminist discourse. Even more problematic may be the absence of analysis toward the political and material reasons these groups have for generating a certain representation of women. FPE needs to more closely interrogate not only its own definition of gender, but also the process of how women define themselves.

Gender, Environment, and Development

In the 1970s, interest in development circles around women's relationships with the environment revolved considerably around deforestation and wood fuel. It was recognized fairly early that women were the primary collectors and users of wood fuel, and indeed a lot of the development literature of this time contained imagery of women walking miles to collect firewood. As a result, women became the target of a two-fold strategy by development agencies. First, wood-saving stoves were introduced to reduce wood fuel consumption; and secondly, a program of large-scale afforestation was started. However, the forestry projects that were established consisted of large tree plantations and were designed and set up with scant regard for local circumstances or need (Braidotti 1994, 84).

Since then, there have been significant shifts in the field of Gender, Environment, and Development studies. Feminist academics as well as activists have played a major role in pushing the field of development studies to recognize more substantive issues. Such issues include how the privatization of water services has forced poor and working

women to choose between paying for water or feeding their children (Adams 1997), how epidemics of breast cancer can be linked to the local environment that women live in (Bretherton 2003; Seager 2003; UNEP 2004), and how planting of woodlots on common land has led to women losing access to traditional herb and wood gathering sites (Mulder and Coppolillo 2005, 118).

In addition, they have drawn our attention to the gendered effects of global phenomenon such as climate change. Women constitute more than half of the world's agricultural work force and produce more than 60-80 percent of the food in the global South (World Bank 2009, 328). One of the projected consequences of climate change is the reduction in crop yields and food production particularly in developing countries. This affects not just women's livelihood but their food security and survival (McFague 2008; Shiva 2008; UN Committee on Sustainable Development 2006; WEDO 2001). Grassroots women and activists are acutely aware of these threats, as evidenced by a workshop held at the World Social Forum in January 2007 by World March of Women and Via Campesina. At this workshop, women analyzed the linkages between food sovereignty, the right to own their land, the right to control what they produce without the interference of transnational corporations, and the right to control their own bodily health and well-being (WEDO 2001; World Social Forum Panel 2007).

Despite the factors outlined above, we find virtually no representation or participation of women in bodies such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) or the Kyoto Protocol. Perhaps even more surprising, even at progressive venues like the World Social Forum there is little talk among transnational environmental groups about the specific gendered impact of climate change. As Fatma

Denton states, “The climate debate is perpetuating the under-valuation and misunderstanding of women’s contribution to environmental management. While a great deal of lip-service has been paid to women’s indigenous knowledge of environmental management and soil preservation, little is being done to integrate local knowledge into mainstream policy” (Denton 2002, 12).

Nevertheless, women are pushing the environmental change agenda far beyond simply advocating for women’s representation in these international organizations. They are pushing for a transformation of the agenda itself. For example, in March 2007 women from Via Campesina occupied the Cevasa sugar mill in the region of Ribereiro Preto, Sao Paulo, to protest a large sugarcane factory. They argued against the conventional wisdom that the production of ethanol could benefit small farmers and protect the environment and highlighted the water, air, and soil pollution as well as the respiratory diseases caused by sugarcane monoculture (La Via Campesina 2007). In addition, women have provided extensive critiques of how corporate capital has been using the language of "sustainable development" to legitimize a global neoliberal agenda (Indonesian Peoples Forum 2002; Shiva 1988; Shiva 2005).

Transnational feminist organizations such Development Alternatives for a New Era (DAWN), who played a key role in shifting paradigms to the Gender, Environment, and Development approach, are also taking on these concerns. They have consistently been critical of mainstream development organizations' handling of the women and environment question. They have also had problems with the Northern mainstream propagation of an essentialist and biologically reductionist ecofeminism. Peggy

Antrobus, one of the founders of DAWN, argues that a more integrated analysis is needed when confronting questions of women and the environment. She articulates some of the characteristics of DAWN's analysis on women and the environment and urges others to emulate them because, "it is holistic; it is feminist; it builds on a synthesis of regional diversity which places, for example, the consequences of tourism in one part of the world and desertification in another in a context which relates them to their common structural origins, thus linking the experience of women at the level of their daily lives (the micro level) to economic trends and their global environmental impacts (the macro level); and it is political - it makes a critique of political systems that ignore women's unpaid work at the level of social and economic planning" (Antrobus 1992, 2).

In recent times, DAWN has introduced a new thematic area in their activism named "Political Ecology and Sustainability," arguing for the need to pay greater attention to the health of the planet alongside women's human rights. These issues are seen as inter-related and develop from a Southern feminist perspective. They explicitly link their political ecology analysis to critiques of global trends in body politics, governance, and political economy (Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era 2009).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have delineated the important schools of thought in feminist environmentalism. I point out that earlier "naturalized" articulations of the connections between women and nature have given way to a much stronger materialist understanding of these connections. The literature on Feminist Political Ecology in particular has stressed that the gendered access to, control over, and distribution of resources are at the

heart of many environmental issues, both in terms of social justice and environmental degradation. By conducting fieldwork within these environmental organizations and movements and incorporating the insights they have found as part of their analytical framework, FPE scholars have been attentive to the environmental and social concerns motivating grassroots movements around the world. Building on this approach, I point to the opportunities for positive ecological and social change that can be produced by adopting a more immanent methodology in the research that FPE scholars do.

CHAPTER III

ACTIVIST STRATEGIES FOR PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Introduction

Using an immanent methodology in my research allowed me to view the problems of women environmentalists as they themselves saw them. From this viewpoint, the concepts that kept arising were ones of women feeling as if they had no voice when it came to their need for control over knowledge, food, health, and natural resources. Furthermore, when they tried to make their voices heard, they were not being listened to and saw no structural mechanism to strengthen their voices within state governance. They understood that the term democracy as it described India did them no good. They want democracy not just in name, but to mean something in their lives. These desires for greater influence over the decisions that affect their lives can be summed up within the aim of promoting a view of democracy that is more "participatory."

Within the field of political science, there is a vast literature devoted to issues of participatory democracy and its potential for deepening political engagement. Scholars such as Carole Pateman, Joshua Cohen, and Carol Gould have stressed the developmental virtues of participatory democracy for yielding citizens that are more able to see the connections between their own interests and those of others (Cohen 1996; Gould 1988; Pateman 1970). Through my work on Feminist Political Ecology, I am also interested in contributing to the theoretical concerns and rich empirical literature that has developed in the field of participatory democracy (Fung and Wright 2003; Menegat 2002; Pieterse

2001). While much of this literature has only dealt with successful experiments in participatory democracy, my project is different in that it attempts to examine organizations that *imperfectly* address issues of participatory democracy through their activism.[15]

As Feminist Political Ecologists provide a material lens through which to view the environmental problems of women, the findings within my research add a political element to this lens. I contend that the strategies of these women's groups also offer a gender-integrated understanding of "participatory democracy."

I begin this chapter by analyzing the problems that these three organizations (Navdanya, DDS, and Omon) face. Although the groups address very specific issues in their activism, I point out that they seek more broadly to address the lack of democratic legitimacy in the Indian state. I then identify five strategies in particular which enable the groups to foster deliberation and participation toward achieving a greater stake in their daily survival. I argue that these first five strategies can help organizations build the capacity of social justice activists and local communities to gain a greater voice in environmental decision-making. These strategies are alike in that they only require engagement between non-state and non-corporate actors. However, I contend that when strategies require groups to engage with state and local governance structures, their choices of action have proven paradoxical. While useful in achieving certain short-term goals, the strategies of using local and global frameworks and creating private

[15] It is beyond the scope of this current project to provide a full account of all the theoretical and empirical developments in this field. However, future projects will attempt to examine more systematically the contributions that scholarship on Feminist Political Ecology can make to that of Participatory Democracy.

governance institutions have offered potential conflicts to the long-term aim of achieving greater participatory democracy.

Problems the Groups Address with regards to Participatory Democracy

In this section, I draw on my participant observation and textual research to offer data and analysis of the problems that these groups address as they relate to a lack of participatory democracy. Many of these problems overlap, and activism is obviously done on more than one issue at a time. I have labeled and separated them into five categories for ease of discussion.

Lack of Participation in Environmental Decision-Making

The first major issue that the groups point to is the lack of policy-making procedures, at both the transnational and state levels, for active community participation in environmental decision-making. For example, the Deccan Development Society was extremely critical of the National Environment Policy (NEP), a document produced by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MoEF) in 2004 articulating the government's view on the relationship between environment and development. They point out that despite the MoEF claim of having had extensive consultations with civil society groups, many indigenous groups and environmental NGOs had been excluded from the process. DDS questions the process of seeking public inputs for a draft that was available only in English on the ministry's website. Lastly, they argue that the NEP, under the assumption that markets and economic instruments are capable of solving basic environmental problems, tends to subordinate environmental concerns to short-term economic interests.

They point, for example, to the proposed monitoring of the NEP by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs rather than an environmental agency (Deccan Development Society 2006a).

The lack of participatory democracy in globalized food production systems is one of Navdanya's core activist concerns. They argue that, under corporate agriculture and the treaty provisions of the World Trade Organization, cultures and ways of life that have existed for centuries are ignored and ultimately destroyed (Shiva 2006a; Shiva, Holla-Bhar, and Jafri 2002; Shiva and Jalees 2006). Navdanya focuses on building democratic mechanisms for participatory governance at the transnational level.

In their activism, they cite transnational collaborations not necessarily bounded by state geographies, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Terra Madre[16] conferences (Shiva 2005; Shiva 2007). They regard these political spaces as potential sites for exercising the politics of participatory democracy. Navdanya sees its struggles for food autonomy and security as deeply linked to justice for people and nature. It addresses this interconnectedness under the larger banner of "Earth Democracy." This philosophy constitutes a core feature of Navdanya's activism. Vandana Shiva writes, "Earth Democracy enables us to envision and create living democracies. Living democracy enables democratic participation in all matters of life and death – the food we eat or do not have access to; the water we drink or are denied due to privatization or pollution; the air we breathe or are poisoned by. Living democracies are based on the intrinsic worth of all species, all peoples; all cultures; a just and equal

[16] Terra Madre is a conference held in Italy in which issues of food and globalization are discussed and debated.

sharing of this earth's vital resources; and sharing the decisions about the use of the earth's resources". (Shiva 2005, 6)

Another example is that of Omon's activism against the opening of iron ore mines in the community. The State Pollution Control Board holds what are called Environmental Public Hearings before granting environmental clearance to any company that wishes to open a mine. At the public hearings the company is required to give details of the nature of the project and its potential environmental impact in the area. However, according to activists I spoke to at Omon, no effort is made at the hearings to inform people about the environmental implications of the proposed project. In many cases the local community is kept out of the hearings altogether. Villagers from outside the affected area are often brought in by the companies to give their acceptance to the project. In addition, environmental impact assessment reports are also sometimes "doctored." In other words, waterfalls, forests, and other natural habitats are often eliminated altogether from their "environmental impact" assessment reports. In all of the above instances, activists seek participatory democracy in the ongoing processes of governing institutions whether they are at the local, state, or transnational level.

Ownership of the Commons

A related second point that runs through much of the activism that these groups do is a call for a greater civil society participation, management, and ownership of common property resources such as land, water, forests, etc. There have been some moves towards participatory governance in India, particularly in the management and protection of forests. After years of exploitation and forest degradation, India launched its National

Forest Policy in 1988 and the Circular on Joint Forest Management (JFM) in 1990 (Gadgil and Guha 1995).

As Ashok Swain writes, "In revising its national forest policy in 1988, the Indian government for the first time declared that forests were not only to be commercially exploited but must also contribute to soil conservation, environmental protection, and the survival needs of the local population"(Swain 1997, 822). The JFM specifically states that the Forest Department co-manage forests with communities in ways that reflect the Forest Department's own conservation and revenue goals *as well as* the local priorities of the forest populations.

While this sounds good in theory, scholars like Bina Agarwal have raised critical questions about whether the benefits and costs of these new institutional arrangements are being shared equally by women and men. She points out, "Unlike the old systems of communal property management where all villagers, including women, had some form of use rights by virtue of being residents of the village community, under the new formalized system of control of common property resources, rights are dependent more directly on formal membership of the emergent community institutions from which women are often excluded" (Agarwal 1997, 38-39). These include spaces like village meetings and Forest Department offices where women frequently experience intimidation by police and forest officers.

However, Renana Jhabvala, a scholar-activist with the Self-Employed Women's Association, believes that despite certain problems forestry is a sector which can generate small-scale economic development programs for women. She writes, "Forestry is a sector where women's employment can be increased many-fold. Reforestation is a priority for

the country, and forests need to grow. Reforestation programs of nursery growing, plantations, and tending of plants can be handed over to women's groups. Collection, processing and sale of minor forest produce are another major area. One calculation showed that if the nursery growing for the Forest department in Gujarat was done through women's groups it would increase employment for six months for more than 100,000 women". (Jhabvala and Sinha 2001, 12)

Jhabvala points out that this would not only mitigate gender disparities in economic development, but also that this could potentially also improve the forestry programs by making them more transparent and accountable.

However, while decentralization and community-state partnerships have been touted as an alternative to state-led natural resource management, they generally suffer from a lack of coherent overall objectives and poor identification of priorities. For instance, groups such as DDS point to the failure of both the market and the state to address the food needs of people. Their activism calls for "Food Sovereignty" which argues for "developing food production, circulation, and consumption systems that are under the command and control of local communities" (Mazhar 2007, 64). They advocate measures to put resources such as water, land, and forests in the hands of the community.

Food Security and the Public Distribution System

Two of the three groups I spent time with (Navdanya and DDS) focus the majority of their activism on issues revolving around food politics.

Navdanya talks about food insecurity in India as being impacted by trade liberalization and governmental regulations. The removal of quantitative restrictions on

the import of food from outside has led to the dumping of cheap, subsidized agricultural products by other countries to India. This lowers farm prices, thus depriving farmers of a living wage. This might be considered to be a good thing for consumers, but Navdanya argues that this has not led to a decrease in food prices. Their report states that since the initiation of trade liberalization measures, food prices have increased by 60 percent (Navdanya 2007a).

In addition, liberalizing seed regulations has allowed private seed companies to sell hybrid or genetically modified (GM) seeds. These seeds are very expensive and don't deliver on their promise of high yields, thus driving farmers into further debt. According to Navdanya, GM seeds lead to loss of biodiversity. They also accuse GM seeds of spreading health hazards, citing studies by the Center for Science and Environment pointing to high pesticide residues in Indian Coke and Pepsi drinks (Shiva 2006b).

Other factors Navdanya has identified as threatening food security in the region is the state's inadequate identification of being "Below the Poverty Level" and a Public Distribution System that is too centralized. The ill-effects of the Green Revolution, the recent influence of multinational corporations (MNCs) and international financial institutions (IFIs) on state policy, and corporate entry into retail supply chain management have only worsened concerns over biodiversity, access, and control of the food system. Navdanya compounds these worries by linking industrial agriculture to the environmental threats of climate change, pointing to increased water scarcity and overuse of fossil fuels (Navdanya 2006a; Shiva 2008).

Like Navdanya, DDS also examines the inefficiencies of the public distribution system with regards to providing food security to India. Farmers no longer produce local

food crops to meet their food requirements. Consequently, every year the acreage under traditional dry crops shrinks and the production declines. This could lead to the disappearance of hundreds of varieties of pulses[17] and crops that were traditionally farmed on dry land areas. Furthermore, the PDS relies on commercial agriculture for its food supply. This has brought with it seed companies that have monopolized the seed market and sold seeds and other inputs to farmers at exorbitant prices (Satheesh 1998). To combat some of the problems with the PDS, DDS has instituted an *Alternative Public Distribution System* (APDS). The main aim of the APDS is regional self-sufficiency in their own traditional crops (Deccan Development Society 2006c).

DDS also highlights some of the environmental and cultural aspects of centralized food distribution policies. With regards to the environmental impacts of these policies, over-irrigation has not only resulted in a cut in the productivity of well-endowed lands but also has led to increased salinization and water logging (Satheesh 2005a). At the other end of the spectrum, a problem of desertification has been slowly at work in dry land farming areas. These are typified by erratic rainfalls, nutrient poor soils, ecological heterogeneity, and recurring drought. Some of the cultural impacts are that people have stopped growing their traditional crops such as coarse cereals (sorghum, millets) and pulses (pigeonpea, chickpea, lentils, mung, etc.) which have been the backbone of their agriculture and the traditional food for their communities (Mazhar 2007).

[17] According to the FAO the term pulses are reserved for crops that harvested solely for the dry grain. They include kidney beans, lima beans, moth beans etc (Food and Agriculture Organization 2001).

Environmental and Development Policies of the Indian state

These groups regard as problematic the way in which the Indian government couches its development policies in the language of "environmental sustainability." A central insight of all these groups is that the domination of nature has been part and parcel of a development agenda that has systematically brought benefits to some people at the expense of others. For instance, state development policies have led to widespread displacement of populations, particularly *Adivasi* or tribal populations (Swain 1997). Pramod Parajuli points out for instance, that although *Adivasis* comprise only 8 percent of the national population, 40 percent of those displaced by development projects are tribal (Parajuli 1998). Other issues that subaltern groups generally contend with include deforestation, water logging, downstream water shortages, and salinization.

Although Indian governmental sources and the World Bank have tried to cast liberalization in positive terms, stating that it has led to a decrease in national rural and urban poverty, privatization and liberalization have been seen as exacerbating environmental problems[18]. If one actually disaggregates the national poverty data we see that Orissa, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh are the states with the largest number of poor and that they have fared the worst with regards to decreases in poverty rates. Rural poverty reduction has been high in wealthier states like Kerala, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, as well as Jammu and Kashmir. Scholars point to the fact

[18] An overwhelming majority of this rural poor are Dalits and women. Dalits constitute 25% of India's population and 49% of Dalits fall below the poverty line as opposed to 39% of the overall population. They constitute 25% of the rural population yet they account for 42% of the poor. Rural women have significantly lower literacy rates than the national average. The rural female literacy rate was only 31.65% in 1995-96, approximately half of that of their rural female counterparts (Patel and Muller 2004).

that the states most urgently in need of poverty reduction have experienced much lower growth rates than the wealthier states. Raj Patel writes, “While there may be a continuing overall trend out of poverty, cross-state inequality seems to be widening as some states – and their proportionally large rural population – are left behind. Rural growth and poverty reduction has stalled in the poorest states” (Patel and Muller 2004, 19).

DDS has been involved recently in a campaign against the planting of *jatropha*[19] on wastelands for biofuel production. DDS argues against mainstream discourses that these plantations will green the wastelands and provide both fuel to the auto industry and livelihoods to people. They point out instead that the benefits will stay with "rich car owners" while the poor will lose their control over land. This land gives them access to a large number of food and medicinal plants, uncultivated foods, fuel woods, and fiber. In their activism, they prefer to call them "agro-fuels" instead of biofuels. They write, “The experience thus far has shown that this energy cropping was far from giving life and supporting biodiversity, so there is little reason to confuse it as ‘bio.’ On the other hand, the prefix ‘agro’ is meant to imply how this is just another way of turning life-giving agriculture into agro-industrial production and turning it over to corporate control”(Deccan Development Society 2007, 6).

Health Issues

All three organizations focus on health issues in their activism. Navdanya concentrates its activism mostly on the health risks posed by GMOs. Omon has brought to light an increased rate of local respiratory illnesses coinciding with an increase in

[19] Jatropha is a plant that grows in tropical countries like India. The oil from the plant is being used to make biodiesel fuel.

mining. Both DDS and Omon focus more on preventing pharmaceutical companies from taking over health services in their communities. They train women in preparing herbal medicines for common illnesses such as fevers, colds, coughs, etc.

DDS also runs a health program which is primarily geared toward local healing systems and the revival of local herbal and plant medicines. Having found that increasingly people were relying on "allopathic" (Western) medicines to cure even the most basic illnesses, they wanted a revival of their traditional healing systems rather than to rely on expensive medicines supplied by pharmaceutical companies in cities. Pulamma (Pastapur Village) told me that "every village has its own medical representative – that medical representative won't take any money or sell the medicines that she makes. They are meant to advise people who come to them, but if things get too serious then they just direct them to the government hospital in Zaheerabad.[20]"

On the second day of a two day health meeting that I attended in Pastapur Village, sangam members had made local medicines to treat ulcers, dysentery, stomach pains, toothaches, allergies/rashes, dog bites, coughs, colds, headaches, mouth blisters, scorpion bites, goiter, and gastroentitus. The community media trust also plays cassettes in sangam meetings that tell the sangam members and other women how to prepare medicines from herbs and medicinal plants.

The women were also concerned about the health consequences of eating genetically modified and hybrid varieties of seeds. Paramma from Shapur Village told me, "We have seen the consequences of growing hybrid and GM varieties, eating food of this type, affects the health of even the animal. Moreover food produced in this way

[20] ISD1 2008

increases pollution in the world – so by producing naturally we are not just thinking about our own community – we are thinking about the future of the county as well."[21]

Addressing the Lack of Participatory Democracy

At their heart, all of these problems address an aspect of democracy *within* states – that is, democratic relationships between national officials and the citizens they are meant to represent.

I have identified seven strategies[22] that these groups employ to further their aim of making political leaders and policy-makers accountable to wider publics. I argue that while the first five of these strategies are not particularly problematic as they seek to build capacity within the groups and build local democratic politics from the ground up, the last two (Use of Local and Global Frameworks and Creation of Private Governance Structures) require further examination. While they target the state as an institution for the protection of environmental rights, the way that these two strategies are employed lets the state off the hook in terms of its responsibility for advancing development policies that should be geared towards greater equity and participation. This is a point that will be discussed in more detail in the sections below.

Five Strategies that Enhance Participatory Democracy

The strategies these groups employ that enhance participatory democracy are:

[21] ISD2 2008

[22] This typology was created by Brooke Ackerly. Ackerly has developed it from her work examining strategies used by women's human rights activists working in local and transnational contexts (Ackerly and D'Costa 2004; Ackerly 2001b; Ackerly 2005)

1. ***1.*** Organize deliberative opportunities for women and community members to discuss their problems and decide on a reasonable course of action ***(Creation of Deliberative Spaces).***
2. ***2.*** Train women in various skills such as sustainable agriculture, herbal medicines production, etc. ***(Training).***
3. ***3.*** Educate people on issues related to organic farming and sustainable development through alternative media, schools, campaigns, etc. ***(Education).***
4. Create networks at local, national, and transnational levels between other organizations working on environmental and sustainable development issues ***(Networking).***
5. Use an integrated approach to environmental and social justice activism ***(Linking Across Issues).***

Creation of Deliberative Spaces

All three groups attempt to build democratic spaces and moments for deliberation. The groups regard this as a crucial component of the work they do to enhance participatory democracy, as it empowers disadvantaged individuals who have traditionally been excluded from the public sphere to come together and talk about the problems that exist in the area. Creating mechanisms for deliberation allows them to raise the level of political awareness and participation and allows members in the group to learn from each other's analyses and ideas.

For instance, the strengthening of Mahila Samitis (women's groups) in each village is one of the core principles of Omon's work. Omon believes that forming these groups will provide meeting spaces for women to disseminate important information, participate in decision-making, and mobilize both women and men for community action. Omon has been able to initiate Mahila Samitis in 9 of the 25 villages in which they work. These groups meet on a weekly basis and some of the women bike 6-8 miles on rocky terrain to attend the meetings. A facilitator is appointed at the meeting to go around the room

asking women to talk about the most pressing problems in their particular village. Ambika, one of the activists from told me,

> Though our efforts in organizing MS's in the villages have not met with instant success, we are happy that we have succeeded in bringing women together and increasing their confidence levels. Our strategy has been to give women information on all vital issues such as health, welfare programs of the government, land rights, and women's rights through the MS's. As a result, they feel stronger and capable of facing the challenges and acting on their own strength. Interaction with other communities, groups, and other struggling people in other villages has also helped them to understand their own situation better.[23]

An underlying tension that I observed was the level of threat that the Omon women activists felt. Their activism against the mining companies in particular has led to women receiving death threats from what they termed the "iron mafia" in the village. Jharkhand[24] (the state in which they work) was carved out of the larger state of Bihar in northern India in order to bring renewed hope to the *Adivasi* communities, which were marginalized and exploited by non-tribals in Bihar. However, instead of helping to forge a contract between politicians, state officials, and the local people, the government has been more interested in controlling the lucrative natural resources of the area (Omon Mahila Samiti Meeting 2007). The Mahila Samitis are important in this politically restrictive context, as they create safe spaces for women to get together and make visible the problems they experience on a daily basis.

DDS has a similar system that they call "village sangams" (voluntary associations of poor women). These sangams largely consist of Dalit women but are ostensibly open to women from a wide range of castes and religions. During my time with DDS, I participated in four sangam meetings. I found that there was a wide array of topics being

[23] ISO1 2007

[24] Jharkhand was officially founded on November 15, 2000.

covered, ranging from discussions about the state of the local seed banks and whether a woman sangam member should get a loan for an eye operation to strategies on how to tackle issues of domestic violence.

Navdanya organizes meetings by inviting organic farmers from across India to share their stories of success with organic farming. They also invite transnational activists such as those working with the International Forum on Globalization. At these meetings they discuss issues of local and global importance such as forcible government take-over of land and farmers resistance to genetically modified seeds and the related intellectual property/biopiracy implications.

Training

Another way that the groups seek to enhance participatory democracy is to provide members with skill-sets that are useful in their particular community. The diffusion of knowledge allows communities a certain degree of self-sufficiency, decreasing their dependence on a class of externally situated experts and offering them a greater stake in identifying and solving their own problems.

For instance, Omon sends women representatives to attend workshops and meetings outside their village. These workshops and training programs center primarily on issues of general and reproductive health. The training programs are usually held in the capital city Ranchi or at other key nodal cities in Jharkhand. The limited resources of the group make it hard to send more than one person, but as one of the activists at Omon told me, "We cannot afford to send more than one or two people per training meeting, but when

we come back we make sure that we share whatever important issues we learned with the rest of the group and people in the village.[25]"

After discussing specific problems at the sangams, DDS members organize training sessions on a number of topics such as animal husbandry, women's health, organic farming, documentary filmmaking, etc. In addition, they take more senior sangam members on trips to countries such as Peru, Canada, and the United Kingdom. At these venues, women share the skills they have acquired in organic farming.

Navdanya operates strictly as an organization that offers training on organic farming practices to farmers/organizations/communities in other parts of India. They have a team of people who go to a particular area and work with farmers to make their practices more sustainable. They also run a model organic farm in Dehradun, where farmers can spend time and learn sustainable agricultural practices.

Education within their Larger Community

Consciousness raising and education in the larger community are important strategies for all three groups as a means of enhancing participatory democracy in at least two respects. First, it enables activists to bring politics to local spaces and connect it to the lived experiences of individual members of the community. Secondly, it helps the organization raise questions of how alternative social arrangements might lead to a more just political society.

For instance, Draupadi, an Omon team-member told me, "Every year we have a big theme for Women's Day. We come up with the theme together by discussing it in our Mahila Samitis. Last year, the theme we came up with was pollution due to mining

[25] IS02 2007

because that seemed to be the thing on everybody's mind.[26]" At the meeting, they spoke with the women about the problems that pollution was causing, particularly on respiratory health. I learned later that although they had brought in a speaker to talk about pollution, the speaker did it in a very general way. This seemed to be done so as not to cause any problems with the mining companies.

With the encouragement of Omon, some women's groups have also started making some conscious political decisions about their daily lives. For instance, women in the village of Baliyagoda have started an initiative to protect the forests around where they live from indiscriminate logging. This initiative explicitly enhances participatory democracy through educating community members about their political stake in maintaining the health of the forests. Saarthi, one of the women who started the initiative, told me,

> We try to explain to the men not to cut the jungle in a reckless manner. After all, it is the women who go collect the firewood and medicinal plants which are essential for our families' survival. So we have to make sure that there is enough to last for a long time. We don't let mining companies come into our area at all. We have seen the problems they have caused in other villages. Villagers here have a good understanding about the problems that these mining companies are causing. We are convinced that no mining should take place. The illnesses that used to be in the city are now in certain villages which have allowed the mines to come in. We are completely against this.[27]

DDS and Navdanya also educate the communities in which they work about the shared problems they confront as well as give them tools to participate in creating alternative visions. One of DDS's most important initiatives is the setting up of a Pacha Saale (Green School). This school imparts both formal learning and what they term "life

[26] ISO3 2007

[27] ISO4 2007

skills" to rural children. These life skills include ecological agriculture, carpentry, pottery, paraveterinary sciences, herbal medicines, masonry, permaculture, etc. Providing a counter to more mainstream views regarding what is considered valuable education, they regard this type of education to be more useful to children in the long run (Deccan Development Society 2000).

Some of the women farmers of the Deccan Development Society are also trained as documentary film-makers and operate a Community Media Trust where they produce documentaries on agriculture-related issues relevant to their community (Community Media Trust Pastapur 2005).

Navdanya also partners with schools, colleges, and other institutions to disseminate information about the practice of organic farming. Like DDS, they conduct action-research around a host of issues having to do with biodiversity, organic farming, water privatization, etc.

Networking

All three groups attempt to create networks with other groups locally, regionally, or transnationally. This enables different organizations to come together and strategize on how to hold multinational corporations responsible to certain broader social norms. Navdanya does so by creating alliances with other organizations working on similar issues, building university-community partnerships, participating in transnational and regional meetings like the World Social Forum and Terra Madre, and disseminating their research to governmental and inter-governmental bodies.

DDS also adopts some similar strategies, but Omon and DDS differ from Navdanya in the sense that they focus on building mostly local and regional networks amongst

groups that are based in the global South. The head of DDS explained to me that apart from the political reasons for doing so, they believe these networks to be more "action-based" than networks run out of the global North.[28]

For instance, DDS has founded the Andhra Pradesh Coalition in Defense of Diversity, a coalition of 142 civil society organizations from all the 22 districts of Andhra Pradesh. DDS is also a leading member of South Asian Network for Food, Ecology, and Culture (SANFEC), a coalition of 200 ecological groups from Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Sri-Lanka. In terms of issue specific coalitions within India, DDS is a member of South Against Genetic Engineering (SAFE), a coalition of 50 farmers groups, civil society organizations, scientists, academics, and media practitioners from the four southern states of India (Deccan Development Society 2001).

Omon focuses on building local networks, although their networks are much less dense. Apart from their links to the Jharkhandi Women's Empowerment Program (JWEP), an umbrella group of women's organizations working on social justice issues in Jharkhand, all their other networks are constructed and maintained by B.I.R.S.A.

Linking Across Issues

All three groups recognize to various degrees the importance of an integrated approach to their activism for enhancing participatory democracy. In other words, they don't just focus on issues that are strictly recognized as "environmental" in nature. Instead, they see all social justice issues as integrated.

For example, when I had the opportunity to sit in on one of the meetings held at the Omon center, some of the issues that were discussed included: a) Food rations - why

[28] ISD3 2007

some of the villagers were getting them from the government and other were not; b) Witch hunts *(Dayan-hatya)* - they talked about an upcoming case where they had to take a young girl from a nearby village (Gidilpi) who had witnessed her mother being killed by her father and brother to the local court in Chaibasa. A conversation ensued about how women were labeled witches often to get the property of the women in the family. One of the women present joked that the real witches in the area were actually the mining companies and the politicians; c) Incest - a woman brought up a case of brother-sister incest in the area. She said that in her village there was talk about how the brother had raped the sister and that she was now pregnant. There ensued a discussion regarding whether Omon should intervene or wait for the girl to come to the group for help herself. A decision was taken that the woman from Omon who resided in the village should go speak to the girl and her family and explore options to terminate the pregnancy; d) Diarrhea - eight people had died of it in one area and a woman wanted to know how she could get more outreach about the herbal preventive medicines that were available at Omon (Omon Mahila Samiti Meeting 2007).

At first glance, it might seem that Omon has an extremely ad-hoc approach to their activism. Indeed, a donor representative who came to evaluate the group's work said as much. After spending a few days with the group, she reported back that they needed to "streamline" their activism. She argued that the group's work was extremely "elastic" in nature and should focus only on mining and their herbal production center (Khanna 2005). However, this approach seems to negate the deliberative structures that Omon has set in place so that women can talk about the immediate problems in their lives.

It also ignores the fact that Omon does see their activism against mining and its environmental impact as not the only problem, but part and parcel of a larger constellation of social issues that needs attention. Even if they eliminated the mines, they recognize that they are still left with a severely malfunctioning public health system, abysmal literacy levels, and societal norms that dictate that it is okay to practice domestic violence and label women witches and kill them. It also ignores the fact that it is Omon's activism against mining that is endangering activists' lives.

Lastly, the integrated approach that Omon employs builds legitimacy in their community. The community members recognize Omon as a *social justice group* as opposed to one that focuses mainly on isolated environmental issues. This is important because they are the only community-based organization in the area to do this kind of work.

Villagers in the area have come to know of the work that Omon does on mining and health. In my time there, a person living in the area approached Ambika about a problem he had with one of the local mining companies. According to him, blasting done by a nearby mine had caused considerable damage to his home. He was worried that with the monsoons coming, he would not be able to provide adequate shelter from the rains for his family. He requested Ambika to speak with the manager of the mine and get them to fix the damage.

Another one of the meetings I was present at was interrupted by a person who said that his neighbor had delivered a baby but her placenta had not come out (Omon Medicinal Plant Meeting 2007). He thought that there was something wrong and asked some of the women in the group to come and help. These examples are meant to

highlight the "multiplier effects" of having an organization like Omon in the area (Ackerly 2009). These multiplier effects serve an educational purpose and thus enhance participatory democracy.

Similarly, women members of DDS see issues such as violence against women, sustainable agriculture, education, and women's health as intricately linked to larger issues of social justice and democracy to and for people. They recognize that focusing on larger social problems in the area helps them do their work better. Chandramaa, one of the more senior activists at DDS told me that part of the reason that she enjoys her work with DDS is because the staff doesn't dictate what the agenda is for the group. They decide within the organization what issue they would like to do more work on, and then DDS staff helps them with finding resources. She said,

> A lot of women were complaining that they feel bad about leaving their small children out in the hot sun while they are tending to their agricultural fields. Many sangam members brought up this issue in the meetings. The DDS staff realized that this was a problem for us and for many women and asked us what would be the best solution. We advocated the introduction of 'balwadies.' These are day care centers where we can leave our babies when we are out plowing the fields. It is good for us because they are out of the hot sun. They get food while they are there, and we can concentrate on our work with some peace in our mind.[29]

Recognizing a host of social justice issues, Navdanya focuses the bulk of their activism around the problems that are inherent in industrial agriculture and undemocratic global governance institutions. More recently Navdanya has spoken vociferously about the linkages between chemical agriculture and climate change. Vandana Shiva brings up a range of interesting gender issues while discussing IFIs and MNCs. Most of these concerns center around issues of health and food. She makes the link between the growth of international pharmaceutical companies and the onslaught of hazardous contraceptive

[29] ISD4 2008

technologies employed against women. She points out that while these discourses are often couched in "environmental" and “pro-choice” terms, what they effectively do is deflect attention away from the issue of over-consumption and greed in developed countries (Navdanya 2007b).

Paradoxical Strategies: Uses and Potential Dangers

While the discourses that many of these groups employ might make it easy for us to believe that they emphasize democratic values (such as enhancing transparency and accountability and promoting access to excluded groups) as the means of addressing contemporary problems, it is not a given. The strategies that these groups use can potentially undermine their efforts to address democratic deficits in national institutions.

The common thread in the next two strategies is that they both require engagement with state or local governance structures. As I will demonstrate below, the way these strategies are employed by the groups, while useful in some respects, can be counterproductive to the aim of participatory democracy. The two strategies are:

1. Use locally and globally resonate frameworks in their activism – Gandhian philosophy, Climate Change, Food Sovereignty, invoking language of culture and tradition, decentralization ***(Use of Local and Global Frameworks)***.
2. Creating private governance structures and institutions.

Use of Local and Global Frameworks

All three groups couch their activism in language that they know will appeal to their respective local or transnational constituency. Some of these frameworks are local in their orientation, while others are more global and have filtered down from transnational environmental movements. Not only have local frameworks proved

important for generating community support, it has now become standard practice for local groups to use global discourses to legitimize their activism. One of the material benefits of employing global discourses is that it allows them to tap into transnational funding networks. It must be noted that the local political cultures in which these groups operate potentially influence what strategic frameworks are deemed acceptable. I will examine the ramifications of these influences later in the chapter.

Navdanya and the Framework of Gandhian Philosophy

The large majority of Navdanya's activism against IFIs and MNCs is couched in an anti-imperialist and Gandhian philosophy (Navdanya 2007a; Navdanya 2008b; Shiva, Holla-Bhar, and Jafri 2002). Navdanya draws parallels between the loss of sovereignty that occurred during the British occupation and what is happening in contemporary times with the strengthening of multinational corporations and global trade rules. There are many potential reasons why they choose to adopt this particular strategy. For instance, the use of Gandhian thought and anti-colonial discourse in their campaigns helps Navdanya demonstrate that issues of environmental justice are explicitly related to participatory rights and who gets to make decisions.

Secondly, Gandhian ideas have a great deal of legitimacy both within and outside India, which enables Navdanya to use Gandhian philosophy as moral argumentation to support their struggles. This is something akin to work that faith-based organizations do on environmental issues in the United States (Gottlieb 2004; Gottlieb 2006). In advocating solutions for environmental problems, Navdanya alters the "What would Jesus do?" question to "What would Gandhi do?" Navdanya attempts to modernize his

ideas of village-level development to fit the environmental and social needs of the 21st century and proposes that Gandhian thought can provide true alternatives to neoliberal globalization and the havoc it is wreaking on the planet (Navdanya 2008b).

Thirdly, the use of Gandhian ideals in their activism makes it possible to form a host of local and transnational coalitions with social justice groups working on issues that might not have anything to do with food sovereignty issues. In fact, Navdanya in recent times has attempted to put together a list of social justice organizations that work on Gandhian principles in an attempt to broaden their own network, which is relatively weak within India.

In concrete terms, Navdanya borrows key concepts from Gandhi such as "Satyagraha" and "Swaraj" and applies them to its campaigns. Satyagraha is a philosophy and practice of non-violent resistance and swaraj essentially means self-rule/self-governance through community building. Adopting this terminology, Navdanya launched the Bija Satyagraha (seed non-violence) campaign against Seed Laws and Patent Laws that seek to make sharing and saving of seeds a crime and make seeds the property of corporations. The Bija Swaraj (seed self-rule) campaign launched by Navdanya demands that first, Indian laws do not legalize patents on seed and food; and secondly, that Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) is reviewed to exclude patents on seed and food (Navdanya 2007d). Navdanya also launched a Jal Swaraj (water independence movement) in the year 2000 to protect water from privatization and commodification. They actively campaign against water privatization schemes run by the World Bank, in particular the Delhi Water Supply scheme (Navdanya 2006b).

In August 2007, Navdanya also launched a Corporations Quit Retail campaign evoking a 1942 Quit India campaign led by Gandhi and others for immediate independence (Navdanya 2008a). In the 1942 movement, the Indian National Congress demanded complete independence from the British. The British failure to comply with this demand led to the launching of a massive civil disobedience movement (Sarkar 1989). The Navdanya campaign was organized under the umbrella of "The National Movement for Retail Democracy," a broad alliance of farmers unions, hawkers groups, traders associations, consumer forums, trade unions, and non-governmental organizations. This campaign is very much in keeping with their larger emphasis on Food Sovereignty and activism against what they term the "corporate takeover" of agricultural biodiversity. Drawing parallels between the East India Company and Indian and multinational corporations like Wal-Mart, Bharti, and Reliance, Navdanya appealed to the Prime Minister and the leader of the Congress government Sonia Gandhi to stop the corporate entry of retail into India (Hindustan Times 2007).

It is interesting to note that the local framework of Gandhian philosophy is mainly used in campaigns directed against multinational corporations and international financial institutions. The problem with using the framework this way is that it exclusively vilifies outsider exploitation while putting forth romantic notions of nationalism. Such romantic notions paint a virtuous picture of the grassroots that lacks adequate critique of other hierarchical problems and local oppression. Additionally, it is only in its activism against MNCs and IFIs where Navdanya tends to accord the state a very neutral role, tiptoeing around its complicity in enforcing IFI dictates and participating in "development" projects which have led to the destruction of the local environment, culture, and

sustainable ways of living. There is an appeal to the state to protect its citizens but no explicit critique of the role that it has played in exacerbating social injustice through its policies.

Using this Gandhian framework, Navdanya omits and thus obfuscates the fact that the Indian state has been complicit in many environmental harms and social injustices against its people from the time of Independence, a fact that many Indian environmentalists have brought to light both in their activism and scholarship. Some scholars have even argued that there is effectively no difference between pre-Independence and post-Independence India, where extraction and displacement of people in the name of economic growth still continue to persist [for excellent critiques of the state and its role in displacing people in the name of development, see (Baviskar 1995; Baviskar 2001; Gadgil and Guha 1995; Roy 1999).

Navdanya and the Global Frameworks of Food Sovereignty and Climate Change

When addressing problems of food security and industrial agriculture, Navdanya adopts the more global frameworks of Food Sovereignty and Climate Change (Shiva 2008). Within the Food Sovereignty frame in particular, the group's advocacy for participatory democracy is manifested in a clearer critique of the Indian state. Examining domestic issues such as the failures of the Public Distribution System, Navdanya criticizes the inefficiency and corruption of the state. They advocate the restructuring of the PDS, with control of food security being shifted to local communities.

While not totally abandoning the more commonly understood term of food security, Navdanya emphasizes a definition more in line with that of Food Sovereignty.

Shiva, Bhar, and Jafri elaborate what they mean by sovereignty in one of Navdanya's publications,

> The reinvention of sovereignty has to be based on the reinvention of the state so that the state is made accountable to the people. Sovereignty cannot reside only in centralized state structures, nor does it disappear when the protective functions of the state with respect to its people start to wither away. The new partnership for national sovereignty needs empowered communities which assign functions to the state for their protection. Communities defending themselves always demand such duties and obligations from state structures. On the other hand, TNCs and international agencies promote the separation of the community interests from state interests and the fragmentation and divisiveness of communities. (Shiva, Holla-Bhar, and Jafri 2002, 4)

In recent times, we see that Navdanya has linked the problem of industrial agriculture not only to Food Sovereignty but also to the issue and framework of climate change. While they recognize that climate change has various facets, they focus on how industrialized agriculture is exacerbating the problem. They regard fossil fuels to be the "heart of industrial agriculture" and examine how export-oriented agriculture in particular requires the pumping of vast amounts of irrigated water to fields. This leads to scarce water supplies mostly impacting the poor. They point to weather patterns being disturbed and the increase in droughts and floods with the advent of climate change. They also point to the use of fossil fuels in industrial agriculture for transporting food over long distances, thus increasing food miles and the use of chemicals and pesticides in agricultural production. They write,

> At a time when we should be reducing 'food miles' by eating biodiverse, local and fresh foods, globalization is increasing carbon pollution through the spreading of corporate industrial farming, non-local food supplies and processed and packaged food. Climate change creates the imperative to reduce CO2 emissions, i.e., to move towards economic localization, producing our needs with the lowest carbon footprint. Economic globalization on the other hand is creating an imperative to increase C02 emissions. This total disconnect between ecology and

> the economy is threatening to bring down our 'oikos' or home on this planet. (Shiva 2008, 11)

In 2007, they also took out a research study entitled "Corporate Hijack of Retail: Retail Dictatorship vs. Retail Democracy." In it they argued that the opening up of the retail industry to domestic and international companies would adversely impact on India in a number of ways: a) the corporate entry into the supply chain management of food will lead to monopolies whereby the producer will not be able to have options regarding where he/she can sell his/her products; b) cheaply sourced goods from China and ASEAN countries will also lead to the loss of livelihoods; c) from an environmental lens, the "Wal-mart model" will increase fossil fuel use and carbon emissions.[30]; d) the advent of these retail stories will lead to more traffic congestion and pollution. They argue that as of now every neighborhood has multiple grocers that they can get their produce from. The opening of these stores will "centralize" shopping, with people needing to drive long distances to purchase their groceries (Navdanya 2008a).

Ironically, Navdanya approaches the transnational influence of MNCs and IFIs by using a more local Gandhian framework and, at the same time, uses the global frameworks of Food Sovereignty and Climate Change to tackle the local issues of food security and industrial agriculture. Within the last two years, Navdanya has shifted its focus from Food Sovereignty more to the framework of Climate Change. While using the framework of Climate Change may be more valuable for donor support, Food Sovereignty may be more valuable for community support. Climate change, as a problem, has both its origins and solutions residing mainly with developed countries.

[30] Other environmental impacts they talk about are the wastes that come with increased packaging, excessive use of preservatives and pesticides in food to make it last longer and air-conditioning and refrigeration for these stores will soak up already scarce reserves of electricity.

Food Sovereignty, on the other hand, centers around concerns that are more relevant to the grassroots, such as concerns over ownership of common property resources and control of food systems.

Deccan Development Society and Food Sovereignty

The Deccan Development Society, like Navdanya, operates under a Food Sovereignty framework in its attempt to bring greater participatory democracy to the food system. They point to three determinants of Food Sovereignty: first, whether the food can be accessed by the communities locally; second, whether the food accessed serves their nutritional security; and lastly, whether local communities can control this food system. Adopting such a framework helps DDS link with other groups that focus on sovereignty concerns, such as GRAIN, the Andhra Pradesh Coalition on Biodiversity, and Via Campesina (the only international network DDS works with).

In addition to the globally recognized framework of Food Sovereignty, DDS employs locally resonant frames in their activism. To raise awareness of food security issues within Andhra Pradesh, they conduct *Jatharas* (Mobile Biodiversity Festivals). These mobile festivals travel from village to village conducting discussions about the spiritual relationships between the farmer and the soil. They emphasize the point that agriculture is not simply a means of livelihood, but a way of life, culture, and rituals. In the various villages where the carts stop, women wash the feet of the bullocks and worship them. Such a strategy would only be relevant within the cultural norms of that region (Deccan Development Society Mobile Biodiversity Festival 2008).

In contrast to Navdanya's Food Sovereignty approach, DDS treats the state with much greater suspicion. Believing that the market and the state have no capacity to properly address the food needs of the people due to its cooptation by MNCs and the World Trade Organization, DDS makes no moves to lobby the state for help or strengthen the state against external undemocratic bodies. In the short term, this leaves a vacuum of influence being filled by bourgeois environmental discourses rather than an environmentalism of the poor.

Creating Private Governance Structures and Institutions

Interestingly, although B.I.R.S.A. couches much of their activism in terms of indigenous resistance to the Indian state or transnational companies, Omon tends to stay away from these stark oppositional frameworks. Instead, Omon has focused the bulk of its activism on creating a private health governance structure in its herbal medicines production and distribution center. Omon initiated the center in Kundrijhor in response to what they perceived as a loss of indigenous knowledge of traditional medicines and healing practices. The production center started in 2001 and employs 10 women. Women from the group go to the forest, collect ingredients, and prepare medicines. They prepare anti-malaria medication, headache balm, and pills for stomach aches, chest aches, knee aches, coughs, and colds. Concentrating heavily on stopping malaria and diarrhea, as they are the biggest killers in the region, some of the Omon women take these medicines to neighboring village markets while others travel village to village, for medical house visits. They also interact with the women in the villages, organizing them and forming Mahila Samities. Paanilahuri one of the senior activists who works at the Kundrijhor center told me,

> We basically realized that the homemade remedies that our ancestors had been using to cure us were being forgotten by our generation. We wanted to spread awareness about these herbal cures. If things get serious and you need an operation I think it is okay to go to an allopathic doctor. But if it is a cough or cold then you should use herbal medicines. We see our struggle against mining as linked to this initiative because if the jungle finishes then so will our medicines. We must tell people about these dangers because a lot of lakri mafia (wood mafia) operate in this area and promote indiscriminate logging.[31]

The group also runs an herbal medicine shop in Noamundi. Birasmati, the woman who sits in the store, told me,

> Through the past years, villagers have come to know of our organization and its work. We have been successful in making a name for ourselves as an organization which prepares and provides good medicines at relatively low costs. Many people come to us for medicines. Many women come with their health problems. The health visitors provide health care to villagers at their doorsteps. Thus, we have been able to provide primary health care to villagers, though in a very limited area of about twenty villages. We have been trying to impart awareness about herbal medicines and strengthening the traditional healing system to women from other areas too. In the training programs for herbal medicines that we hold every alternate year, we take care to include women from other parts of the district too. Besides, our group of trained women healers have been invited by many women's groups in and around Singhbhum district to impart training in herbal medicines to them.[32]

The only hospital in the area is run by the biggest mining company, Tata Steel. They also operate a non-profit organization named Tata Steel Rural Development Society (TSRDS). It was established in 1979 and works in 6 districts in Jharkhand. It provides health and hygiene services, but disturbingly much of their service provision seems centered on "family planning" and reproductive and sexual health, seen by many of the women in the community as coercive.

The women at Omon said that they do not engage much with TSRDS because they don't feel that they do much at the grassroots level. On the other hand, Omon doesn't

[31] ISO5 2007

[32] ISO6 2007

lobby the state because they don't have the time or resources after putting so much of their energy into the herbal production center. And while they don't see the point in lobbying what they see as a corporate state, neither they nor the private hospital have the capacity to meet the health needs of the area. Even though the state might seem like a monolithic entity, there are fault lines that can and should be exploited. It might be worth Omon trying to formulate creative strategies to reclaim their voice in local governance.

For instance, talking about the various state programs that exist for the control of diseases like T.B. and Malaria, Neelam, one of the women in the Mahila Samiti, suggested that the government would be open to a partnership with their community-based organization provided that they "worked hard" to establish the relationship. She added,

> They have a lot of money, but they have no way to implement these at the ground level. We need to work harder to work with the government so that we can have a big outreach to the community and save lives so that money does not go to waste.[33]

Certainly, even if they managed to establish this partnership, a lot more work would need to be done at the governmental level for improving health care services. However, ideas like these should be explored. While Omon provides low cost solutions for common illnesses, they do not have the capacity to act as a substitute for the health care system.

The Alternative Public Distribution System was introduced by DDS in Medak District in the late 1990s as a response to the many problems it saw inherent in India's Public Distribution System. I discussed some of these problems in Chapter One. The program “integrates the goals of sustainable agricultural strategies such as biodiversity

[33] ISO7 2007

and natural resource management with community goals of rural livelihoods, food security, and socio-economic empowerment of Dalits and women, based on plural values, local customs, practices and indigenous knowledge" (Srinivas and Thaha 2000, 1).

Another initiative was the setting up of the Community Gene Fund. It was instituted to ensure women's control over their own seeds. One woman sangam member Tejamma said, "We are completely convinced of the advantages that our traditional foods have over genetically engineered foods. Our food is more nutritious than GE/hybrid varieties will ever be. Our seeds are natural and non-toxic and the knowledge of their cultivation is located within the community.[34]"

An interesting paradox in DDS's work is that although the focus is on community control over seeds, DDS wants to be able to enter the seed market and sell organic seeds at a premium (Satheesh 2005b). While there are obvious benefits in terms of rise in income levels for the community, there is also a danger of becoming too over-reliant on the commercial seed market for income. As of now, they have enough to distribute seeds to anyone in the village who needs them. The entry into the agribusiness sector by organic seeds might lead to a co-optation of their goals as well as volatility in their ability to provide organic seeds to their communities.

DDS's private governance structures are also problematic because by replacing the state in this way, DDS potentially runs the risk of discouraging efforts to improve governance on these issues at the national level. It also reinforces traditional patterns of dependency and patronage between poor people and NGO staff. An ancillary point is

[34] ISD5 2008

that, if at some point external funding for these programs is stopped, there is a danger of large numbers of people being unable to access essential services.

Additionally, DDS receives part of the money for the APDS from the state but does not pressure them to adopt the model at a national level. The limited reach of the APDS means that the majority of people have to depend on the largely inefficient PDS for their food needs.

Singling out these last two strategies from the previous five is not to imply that they are inherently problematic, but rather that they stand out from the others in offering potential contradictions to the groups' goal of greater participatory democracy.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to highlight the strategies and discourses that these women's environmental groups use in their activism for social justice and against environmental degradation. Their activism on these issues provides useful lessons for other environmental activists, scholars, and donors trying to create democratic spaces at the local and transnational level.

There are at least two important implications of this for theoretical work on Feminist Political Ecology. First, there are dangers in celebrating environmental actors from the global South as alternative, authentic voices. Not only does this strait-jacket people into ascribed identities, but also ignores the diversity of their counter-public discourses. We need to have a better understanding of what kinds of things get excluded from these counter-public discourses. For instance, the Gandhian philosophy that Navdanya uses implies that if left to self-determination, India would be fine. Concerning

India's indigenous knowledge, ecologically this may be so. Concerning the Indian state, politically it is not. There are still many problems within India's social hierarchies. Although it is important to preserve thousands of years of indigenous knowledge, the ones closest to this knowledge should not be seen as perfect. Furthermore, no matter how virtuous certain actors may be, it is ultimately the structure of state institutions that will help determine India's political path.

Secondly, although there are good reasons for environmental activists to focus on international governance structures to contain multinational corporations, they should not do so at the expense of focusing attention on the state. There are few institutions that can match the degree of capacity and potential legitimacy that states have to redirect societies along more ecologically sustainable lines. While DDS believes that the state will always be complicit with transnational corporations, the outcomes of state processes are not always foregone conclusions. Competing factions within the state and the necessity of maintaining legitimacy at different levels create opportunities for playing one set of actors against another. As mentioned above, there are fault lines within the state that could be exploited, enabling political changes that enhance participatory democracy. For India’s 1.2 billion citizens, the state will remain a central player in producing (as well as resolving) environmental problems.

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN-FOCUSED ACTIVIST STRATEGIES

Women do not want to be mainstreamed into the polluted stream.
We want to clean the stream and transform it into a fresh and flowing body.
One that moves in a new direction- a world at peace, that respects human rights for all, renders economic justice and provides a sound and healthy environment.

Bella S. Abzug (1920-1998)[35]

Introduction

Bella Abzug is not alone in her desire to see a more transformative politics emerge with regards to global environmental governance and gender. As we have seen in Chapter Two, such arguments have been advanced by feminist scholars and women's rights activists. It is due in large part to their work that we see in recent environmental policy making the recognition and incorporation of women's knowledge of environmental matters, as well as an understanding of the gender specific impacts of environmental degradation.

I have argued in my second chapter that feminist political ecologists have made significant strides in helping us understand the extent to which gender structures access to particular types of knowledge, space, and resources (Fortmann 1996; Gururani 2002). In this chapter, I show how the analysis of Feminist Political Ecology can be greatly strengthened by a closer examination of how different organizations create or employ the category of women as a rhetorical strategy in their own activism. I argue that while these groups have a transformative vision of what participatory democracy would entail (even

[35] Cited in 'A Small World After all. Women Assess the State of the Environment in the U.S. and Beyond. 2002. WEDO and Rachel Carson Institute).

though some of their strategies don't necessarily help them achieve their aims), this is not the case when it comes to gender issues. When addressing environmental problems women face by virtue of their being women, all three groups tend to operate within a very constricted idea of what appropriate roles are for women.

Such an analysis reveals some important insights for feminist environmental activists and FPE scholars. First, the way that activists perceive their problems can lead them to adopt strategies that perpetuate rather than reveal structures of domination and inequality. As Jackson and Chattopadyay state, "We need an understanding of both material transactions and the force of identity discourses in patterning actually existing social relations to see gendered environmental change in other than polarized images of ecofeminism and populist environmentalism" (Jackson. and Chattopadhyay. 2000, 147). Secondly, by adopting strategies that naturalize women's roles, not only may groups close the possibility of building more broad-based coalitions for their movement, but also may weaken their ability to articulate effective alternatives. For these reasons, I contend that FPE scholars need to continue to scrutinize not only romantic essentialisms in their scholarly work but also strategic essentialisms for the categories of gender and nature.

This chapter examines the women-specific problems Navdanya, DDS, and Omon address and the respective strategies they employ in their activism. I argue that their use of strategies based on essentialized notions of women and ideas of women as efficient implementers of environmental solutions leads the groups to ignore the political, economic, and social relations that reproduce marginalization in their strategies. I end by arguing that there is a need to include women in the development process in a genuine way rather than simply invoking a mythological or efficient category of women. While

strategic essentialism has been adopted by and worked for many movements as a form of resistance, I argue that it does not address their lack of landed property and access to social capital, as well as why they are denied full membership in civil society.

Specific Problems the Groups Confront and Accompanying Strategies

In the section below, I attempt to differentiate some of the distinct problems that these groups outline with regards to women and environmental rights and the strategies they have come up with to deal with these problems. Because these strategies are not generic but rather issue-specific, I follow my examination of each problem with an analysis of the groups' respective strategies. The problems that will be analyzed are:

a) Marginalization of Women's Knowledge and Voices

b) Lack of Employment Opportunities for Women

c) Problems of Food Production

d) Environmental Impact and Gender

My analysis reveals two common threads motivating the strategic choices that address these problems. One is a more ecofeminist understanding of women as being closer to the environment because of their presumed spirituality or reproductive biology. The second is that these groups tend to adopt the discourse of efficiency advanced by neoliberal economists[36] (and taken on by donors), in which women are seen as being implementers of environmental programs rather than those constructing or formulating the programs themselves.

[36] The discourse on greater efficiency of women's roles in development is pushed most prominently by the World Bank. The Bank has pushed for intervention most prominently in areas of women's education and the environment (Leach 2007; Robinson-Pant 2004).

Marginalization of Women's Knowledge and Voices

These groups focus to a large degree on revaluing women's indigenous knowledge. Navdanya and DDS do this more in the case of agriculture while Omon does this more in the case of health care, arguing that for centuries women have been biodiversity experts who have met the needs for food and medicines in their societies. The groups point out that women's knowledge and capabilities have often not been fully recognized, and gender norms have led to their exclusion from decision-making processes.

In my research, I observed three distinct strategies to address these concerns. One is to create transnational networks to bring women's concerns to international development bodies. The second is the creation of educational programs to bring women's voices into the mainstream. The third is to valorize women's voices by creating stark oppositions between men and women's ways of seeing the world, where men's ways are connected with death and destruction and women's ways are connected with life and hope.

One of the strategies that Navdanya employs to combat the marginalization of women's voices on a transnational level is to try and create global networks of solidarity, linking local activist concerns with global environmental issues.

To help in these efforts, Navdanya has started a transnational alliance of women named "Diverse Women for Diversity." The international steering committee of this initiative includes activists from Mexico, South Africa, the U.S., and Canada, but the focus is on building leadership amongst women in the global South and pushing for their

voices to be heard not just at local agenda-setting tables but transnational ones such as at the World Trade Organization and the World Bank. The literature states,

> We want to intervene collectively as women in some of the most significant issues of our time, with the women of the South and the women at the grassroots playing a leading role in agenda setting, prioritization, actions and programmes. We want to continue our search for diverse solutions at the local level and a common defense at the global level… Women as a collective force have been missing in the global processes related to peace making and peace keeping, economic globalization and trade, biodiversity, biotechnology and intellectual property rights. (Navdanya 2000)

Navdanya argues that the inclusion of women's voices in treaties such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and in organizations such as the WTO can put forth alternatives based on equality, justice, sustainability, and peace. Navdanya also makes efforts to organize women's activism at a local level and ensure that their voices are heard at the national level. For instance, Navdanya started an initiative titled the "National Alliance for Women's Food Rights" which is comprised of 35 local women's groups (Shiva 2005).

This alliance works to highlight the importance of women's roles in food and health security, as well as the conservation of biological and cultural diversity. The movement was started to protest the ban imposed on indigenous edible oils in India made from mustard, coconut, sesame, linseed, and groundnut which were processed in artisanal cold-press mills. The restrictions that had been placed by the Indian government on the import of soya oil were simultaneously removed, and subsidized genetically modified soya oil started being imported into India.

Although Navdanya attempts to bring these issues of food security and gender to local and transnational spaces, a gendered analysis on the whole seems to be missing

from such initiatives. A simple *add women and stir* approach, while important in bringing the diversity of women's voices to the agenda-setting table, doesn't take on other structural hierarchies such as class, race, etc. or the institutional hegemony of international bodies such as the WTO and IMF.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Navdanya adopts a Gandhian framework in their activism, drawing analogies between British colonial rule and the advent of multinational corporations. While their Gandhian framework seems to be more palatable to many people in India, it doesn't make visible the gendered nature of issues such as climate change and neoliberal policies. Nor does it disrupt entrenched gender hierarchies. This does a disservice to their own activism, as having a gendered analysis can make visible many more forms of hierarchy and oppression.

Aside from addressing women's voices on a transnational level, one of the ways that Navdanya seeks to combat problematic norms of gendered knowledge is to start educational programs with older women doing most of the teaching/instruction. They have started a program termed the "Grandmothers University" at their organic farm in Dehradun. Through this program they bring older women to educate students and professionals about the importance of retaining ancestral knowledge about medicinal plants and traditional food preparation. They also conduct various practical sessions on how to prepare some of these medicinal herbs and traditional foods.

Furthermore, they explicitly tie together the issues of capitalist and religious patriarchy with those of market and religious fundamentalism. Shiva critiques the use of language such as "creators" and "inventors" while talking about attempts of companies like Monsanto to pirate and patent Indian crop products. She explicitly ties men to

religious fundamentalism and women to what she terms life-centered cultures and economies. She writes,

> Religions that recognize the integrity of creation and the sanctity of life are a source of resistance to this destruction. And while men in power redefine religion in fundamentalist terms and in support of market fundamentalism, women in diverse cultures mobilize their faith, their spirituality, their power to protect the earth, and life on earth. Despite being subjected to the double burden of religious and capitalist patriarchy, women are emerging as leaders and guardians of life-centered cultures, economies and policies. Movements to defend water are being led by women. Movements to defend biodiversity are being led by women. Movements for food rights are being led by women. While overcoming their marginalization, women are emerging as guardians of life and the future. (Shiva 2005, 139)

Navdanya is not alone in taking note of the fact that women tend to be at the forefront of struggles against structural adjustment and neoliberal economics. Many feminist scholars have argued that this is mainly *because* the cuts in basic services to health, education, and transportation that accompany these policies impact women the most, fostering a critical consciousness about the global structures that are causing impoverishment in their daily lives.

Navdanya's discourse though argues that they are at the forefront of movements for water and food democracy *despite* being subject to capitalist patriarchy rather than because of it (Navdanya 2005; Navdanya 2007c). Women's resistance, however, *is* grounded in women's oppression. Valorizing women in this way diminishes both the effects of capitalist patriarchy and the courage of anyone to resist it. If women are somehow natural fighters for the environment, then they are immune to the effects of religious and capitalist patriarchy and seem less courageous for following their natural tendencies. Moreover, not only does this essentialize women, it essentializes men into a system that appears natural, obviating men's responsibility to fight against patriarchy.

It is interesting to note that there is a disjuncture between their literature and how they talk about these issues at their meetings and workshops. During a food security workshop held at their organic farm in Dehradun, Vandana Shiva brought up the point that Navdanya had set up "Mahila Anna Swaraj" (Women's Food Democracy) units in 4-5 districts of Uttaranchal and discussed how they provide a model for household food security for the rest of India. She talked about how these women were leading this initiative because they were "the worst affected by hunger and malnutrition" rather than couching it in any essentialist terms (Navdanya 2007b).

At the same food security workshop, Mira Shiva, a senior leader within Navdanya, spoke of how the introduction of the Green Revolution in Punjab with its emphasis on large industrial, chemical agriculture displaced women from agricultural production. Social norms have meant that it is the men that drive tractors, spray pesticides, and harvest the crops. This devaluing of women's roles is reflected in declining sex ratios in the region. The 2001 census showed that there are only 876 females per 1000 males in Punjab (Government of India 2001). Navdanya's project in these instances appears to be one of revaluing and re-politicizing the work that women have done in agricultural production.[37]

These contradictions demonstrate that activists within Navdanya have a very astute understanding of the various forms of oppression that women face and their links

[37] Vandana Shiva also discusses how dowry-related deaths have increased because of the consumerist culture that globalization promotes. She writes, "Dowry… is extracted from the girl's family and devalues women by defining them as a burden. The spread of dowry – used largely for purchasing consumer goods such as cars, televisions, and refrigerators – is contemporaneous and continuous with the spread of the culture of consumerism" (Shiva 2005, 135).

to economic paradigms. It is interesting to observe then that in their campaigns and literature, they conceptualize women in essentialist ways. The potential reasons as to why they do this will be discussed later on in this chapter.

In DDS's campaign literature, the dissemination of which is a major strategy, they sees things differently than Navdanya. DDS appears to have a more integrated understanding of women's oppression as grounded in gender and material realities. One of their publications states,

> The root cause of poverty for both men and women in most developing societies is the entrenched traditional structures: notably class and caste hierarchies, ethnic or religious discrimination and unequal land distribution. All of these add up to lack of access to economic resources and lack of power on the part of the masses, which limits their ability to take control of their lives and improve their well being. Women, however are much more affected in these societies because of gender-specific causes, which stem from patriarchal kinship systems. (Satheesh 2005a, 25)

They point to three material consequences of these traditional forces. First, most women have less direct access than men to capital, property, market, and extension services. Secondly, many women have limited geographical mobility, economic independence, or personal autonomy, and as a result remain economically dependent on male kin. Finally, because of their perceived liabilities and their limited bargaining power, women and girls often receive less health care, education, and training than men and boys (Satheesh 2005a).

DDS credits itself for bringing significant changes in the lives of women with regards to their contribution to society. Samamma, one of the senior activists at DDS explained to me, "Women no longer see themselves as mere agricultural laborers but see themselves as proud farmers.[38]" Indeed, many of the women I spoke to at DDS spoke

[38] ISD6 2008

with a sense of strong purpose and pride in their work. Laxammama, a seed keeper in Humnapur Village, told me,

> We have managed to protect and store 85 different seed varieties and have seed banks in about 55 different places in Medak district…. People are realizing the importance of cultivating your own seeds. The hybrid seeds use a lot of chemical fertilizers which not good for your own health or the health of the animals on the farm. It also spoils the soil's fertility… by eating those seeds people are getting diseases and are not strong enough… By eating our own non-chemical seeds we never get the kinds of diseases you see in the cities. I want everyone to boycott hybrid seeds and eat ours instead.[39]

In the current political climate, groups like DDS occupy a crucial place in debates on food policy and agriculture. DDS proposes taking on the multiple forms of oppression that women face. However, they must be careful in their strategies not to reify some of the very same oppressions and exclusions that they are fighting hard to break down. While women no doubt feel a sense of power in the community which stems from their knowledge of ecologically sustainable agriculture, it is still problematic that the burden of being ecologically sustainable is being thrust on a historically very marginalized section of India's population. One of the potential ill-effects/negative consequences is that it can lead to urban populations, and even rich farmers in irrigated areas of Andhra Pradesh, thinking that they are exempted from this expectation. "Sustainable development" in India seems to be a project "out there" for poor peasants to perform, even as other classes continue to increase their rates of consumption and exploitation of the environment.

Like DDS, Omon employs a materialist understanding of women's resistance. Omon's herbal production center seeks to reclaim indigenous women's knowledge about herbs and other medicinal plants, as well as to train women to prepare herbal medicines

[39] ISD7 2008

and sell them in their local communities. However, donor expectations mandate that they show quantifiable results as to the number of people treated in the community and diseases being treated. Severely under-resourced, such expectations are often hard, and at times impossible, to meet. Detached donors do not always respect that the context and material realities within which these women work might not be conducive to such result-oriented expectations. In any case, Omon needs to retain a certain amount of autonomy in setting their own evaluative criteria, or else it risks becoming the service arm of a donor's agenda.

Lack of Employment Opportunities for Women

Indian environmental groups point to the employment changes that have occurred in India because of increased mechanization and new technology (Navdanya 2007b). As Jhabvala and Sinha write, "In the agricultural sector, men have taken over from women those activities in which technology has substituted machinery for manual labor. All other labor intensive tasks are left to women. Therefore, the introduction of tractors, harvesters, insecticides, weedicides, hormone accelerators, high yielding varieties of seeds, and mechanical cotton pickers has meant that tasks traditionally performed by women and on which many women depend for their livelihood have been appropriated" (Jhabvala and Sinha 2001, 4).

Bina Agarwal has analyzed the decline in the number of rural women in agriculture. She writes,

> This decline, however, was due largely to male workers moving to non-agriculture based work, while women remained substantially in agriculture, indeed increasing their dependence in recent years and growing the gender gap. Today, 53 percent of all male workers, 75 percent of all female workers, and 85

> percent of all rural female workers are in agriculture. And for women, this percentage has declined less than four points since 1972-73. (Agarwal 2003, 192)

Furthermore, there has been a significant slowing down of women's absorption in the non-farm sector. This has been much more pronounced than in the case of men and Agarwal argues that this has been exacerbated by the stagnation of rural non-farm employment.

A 1997 countryside survey by the National Commission on Self-Employed Women and Women in the Informal Sector, in addition to micro-studies of women workers in individual occupations, suggest that women are largely concentrated in the low-and-insecure-earnings end of the non-farm sector (SEWA 2000).

Navdanya provides income to farmers by sourcing their organic produce. Deriving inspiration from the highly successful "*Lijjat Pappad*[40]" program, Navdanya started the Mahila Anna Swaraj program in 2003. It consists of having village-based associations of women plant, gather, cook, sort, process, bottle, and pack a wide range of traditional and organic foods such as papads, chips, pickles, and cereals (Pandey and Vinod Bhatt 2006, 21). Navdanya pays the women a premium price by marketing and selling this variety of products through its various organic outlets, as well as exhibitions and food festivals.

As of 2006, Navdanya had 24 Mahila Samitis functioning in 7 states in India (Uttaranchal, Himachal Pradesh, Western Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Orissa). One of their publications states,

[40] Pappad is a type of savory Indian snack. Lijjat Pappad started as a small group of seven women in 1959. It runs on the principles of common ownership and ethical business practices. It started with an annual revenue of 6,196 in their first year. Sales now total over 3 billion dollars.

> By valuing, estimating, and savoring a Mahila Samiti Anna Swaraj product and paying a fair price for it, the rural and urban women (and men) become partners of the rural women thus ensuring the future of sustainable agriculture and the preparation of sufficient, delicious and organic food. (Pandey and Vinod Bhatt 2006, 22)

While Navdanya addresses the environmental aspect of women's unemployment with a solution of jobs in organic food production, they seem less concerned with rocking the boat as it relates to the gendered aspect of this employment. The basic problem is that women need jobs. Navdanya's solution, however, doesn't address what economic factors play a role in them not being considered viable economic entities in their own right. Most of the employment Navdanya provides is gendered in its orientation instead of addressing larger issues of exclusionary practices in labor participation. Furthermore, Navdanya's rhetoric denouncing capitalist patriarchy is a structural critique. Their strategy, on the other hand, is to create an alternative market offering, adhering to the idea that efficiency is competing in the market.

DDS and Omon also run employment generation programs specifically for women. For instance, DDS has started an initiative named the Alternative Public Distribution System (APDS), which is geared towards increasing regional self-sufficiency in traditional crops. They have instituted two main initiatives to fulfill this objective. First, they subscribe to the idea of eco-employment. This encourages Dalit women farmers to work to improve their marginalized land and make them more productive by engaging in techniques such as bunding, trenching, top-soil addition, etc. Secondly, they have instituted a "land-lease program" which helps those sangam members who are either landless or marginal farmers to collectively work on leased lands

to grow food for their households (Srinivas and Thaha 2000). At a DDS sangam meeting the women explained to me,

> The women farmers pay back the investment made by the society on their land by giving a fixed quantity of sorghum every year for a few years. Every village does its own survey of the most marginalized people in the villages and then distributes black, green, and red ration cards (a black ration card signifies that the person is the most impoverished in the village) on the basis of which grain is sold at highly subsidized prices.[41]

P.V. Satheesh, the director of the organization, estimates that every year 2,000 additional wages are created in each village, the grain availability is increased by 25 percent, and the fodder production goes up by 20 percent (DDS 1998).

While a consequence of this strategy is to offer Dalit women jobs that they normally would not be able to get because of caste and gender hierarchy, the end goal is still the APDS. In fact, DDS was not originally a women's organization. It was only after failing to get men on board with their programs and ideals that they approached women. In this sense, DDS is essentially treating women (the only members of society willing to join their project) as a means to an end, the end being efficiency of the APDS. Additionally, if DDS and the APDS program were to vanish, these Dalit women would no longer be able to get these types of jobs. The absence of a greater program challenging caste and gender hierarchy leaves these women dependent upon the organization. While the women doing the work may see their goal as greater equality, in reality they are more a means to an end.

With the support of Omon, a group of women in the remote village of Kundrijhor have initiated an herbal medicines production center. Started in 2001, there are now 10

[41] ISD8 2008

women working in this Center who go to the forest, collect the ingredients, prepare the medicines, and then take them to the three neighboring village markets. In addition to all of this, they employ six village health visitors who go from village to village, making house visits and providing advice and medicines to the sick on request. The group also runs an herbal medicine shop in Noamundi.

Here we see, however, an example of donors demonstrating ownership over a program that was actually formulated by grassroots women and externally redefining its main objectives. In a recent donor report with a subheading titled "Areas That Need Critical Attention," it was stated that Omon needed to do more to become a self-sufficient economic unit. Yet for Omon, it's not the economic viability of the program that is as important as its health benefits and consciousness raising aspects.

Problem of Food Production

Navdanya and DDS both focus on the issue of sustainable agriculture in their activism. Navdanya points to policy measures where trade liberalization has brought the removal of quantitative restrictions on the import of food from outside and led to the dumping of cheap, subsidized agricultural products by other countries to India, lowering farm prices and thus depriving farmers of a living wage. While proponents claim this is a good thing for consumers, Navdanya argues that this has not led to a decrease in food prices for consumers (Navdanya 2007a).

At the governmental level, Navdanya argues that there is an inability to identify people who are "below the poverty level" (BPL), hence there is a massive reduction of people who are accessing food from the public distribution system. They also fault the PDS for being too centralized (Navdanya 2007b). Another factor that receives attention at

the governmental level is the advent of the Green Revolution, which they argue: a) destroyed regional food security based on diverse cereals and replaced it with rice and wheat; b) concentrated the production of these cereals in Punjab and Haryana; c) forced the farmers into investing in costly inputs (seeds, chemicals, water) and ecologically unsustainable agriculture (Navdanya 2008a).

Both Navdanya and DDS have moved from using the language of food security to the language of Food Sovereignty . DDS appears to be more explicit about this shift whereas Navdanya continues to use the terms interchangeably. However, even when Navdanya uses the term food security, it is still through the lens of Food Sovereignty. For the purposes of this section, it is important that we contrast the language of Food Sovereignty with that of its counterpart food security. Food security, as defined at the 1996 World Food Summit, is said to exist "at the individual, household, and global levels, when all people at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (Food and Agriculture Organization 1996) .

In contrast, some of the tenets of Food Sovereignty include –

- Prioritizing local agricultural production in order to feed the people, access of peasants and landless people to land, water, seeds, and credit. Hence the need for land reforms, for fighting against GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms), for free access to seeds, and for safeguarding water as a public good to be sustainably distributed.
- The right of farmers, peasants to produce food and the right of consumers to be able to decide what they consume, and how and by whom it is produced.
- The right of countries to protect themselves from too low priced agricultural and food imports.
- Agricultural prices linked to production costs: they can be achieved if the countries or union of states are entitled to impose taxes on excessively cheap imports, if they commit themselves in favor of a sustainable farm production, and if they control production on the inner market so as to avoid structural impulses.

- The populations taking part in the agricultural policy choices.
- The recognition of women farmers' rights, who play a major role in agricultural production and food. (La Via Campesina 2003)

It is this last point that we will focus on in the paragraphs below. While Navdanya and DDS both recognize women farmer rights and the major role they play in agricultural production, they tend to valorize their roles instead of politicizing them.

Problems with Navdanya's Frame of Food Sovereignty

As Navdanya's Anna Swaraj (Food Sovereignty) program constitutes the core of its activism, prominent are the issues of environmental sustainability, livelihood, and gender concerns. Focusing their attention on what they term "traditional agriculture," the organization promotes the saving of seeds for the next sowing, sharing seeds with neighboring farms, and interspersing several crops in the same field for natural weed and pest control. They want farmers' produce to be sold primarily in the local community and actively resist the idea that this type of agriculture is "primitive" or incapable of providing the food needs of the world today.

As mentioned above, Navdanya's employment of a particular narrative to talk about reduced consumption on the one hand and the decline in agricultural production and procurement on the other weaves through a host of internal and external factors. Sometimes, the blame for the inefficient public distribution system is leveled at the government. Other times, it is the fault of the World Trade Organization and international financial institutions such as the World Bank. Frequently, it is leveled at both. The focus always returns though to the issue of democracy and what it means for people to have democratic control over the food system. Insisting that this democratic control must be

built through reclaiming political institutions at the local and national level, Navdanya's literature and discourse suggests that this local democracy must be "women-led."

They argue that the PDS system must be maintained, but the artificial divide of "Below Poverty Line" and "Above Poverty Line" must be done away with. They write, "The present food crisis is reflected in bursting godowns and starving people – a reflection of total food insecurity at the household, local and regional levels. A truly decentralized democratic model will put the foundation of national food security – household food security – *in women's hands"* (emphasis mine).

Navdanya prefers a concept of food security that upholds ecology, equity, and efficiency. The use of organic farming and low external input agriculture would protect health and the environment. Sustainable agriculture would also ensure people's right, their livelihoods, and their food cultures. Also, the local nature of food system production would avoid the huge costs that come with centralized procurement and distribution systems (transport, storage, etc).

Some of the issues that they recognize as being obstacles to this system are the fact that land, water, and biodiversity are not under the democratic control of peasants and farmers. In one of their publications, they write,

> Security of land is a central plank of democracy, in an agricultural society, where the majority of the people derive their livelihood from land. Proposals to create markets in tradeable water rights will create water monopolies and deny people access to even drinking water. We believe that all common property resources like water and biodiversity should be owned and managed democratically by local communities…. Democratization and decentralization can bring vibrancy, vitality and relevance to the cooperative sector and provide a democratic and decentralized alternative to the destructive forces of globalization. (Navdanya 2007a, 73)

Even though Navdanya seeks to present a positive image of women as efficient environmental managers and conservers of resources, it obscures important issues concerning property and power. While Navdanya argues for a host of land reform legislation and land ceiling laws which would prevent against land alienation, indebtedness, and mortgages, at no point do they talk about how gendered the land tenure system in India is. The strategy adopted by Navdanya runs the risk of giving women responsibility for saving the environment without engaging with the issue of whether they actually have the resources or the capacity to do so.

Granted, lack of data makes it hard to determine the gendered nature of land ownership. Scholars have had to rely on small scale surveys to assess women's access to land. For instance, Martha Chen's study of rural widows in 1991 found that of the 470 women with a landowning father, only 13 percent inherited any land as daughters (Chen 2000). Many of these small scale surveys and village studies in countries such as Nepal and India reveal that typically few women have ownership rights or control over arable land. In these countries, it is mostly men who have benefited from labor shifts to the non-farm sector. Women are still overwhelming concentrated in the agricultural sector (Agarwal 2002, 2).

Aside from the issue of land, Navdanya conflates organic agriculture with a food system that is "women-led." Shown below, Navdanya provides a list which would make food security "women-centered."

a) High nutrition-per-acre to increase nutritional security
b) Internal input agricultural practice to reduce debt and expenditure on purchased inputs
c) Increased use of drought resistance varieties and crops to reduce ecological vulnerability

d) Organic methods to improve soil moisture, conservation and reduce water demand
e) Diversity of crops to ensure balanced nutrition throughout the year
f) Use of farmer saved open pollinated varieties to reduce costs and improve adaptation (Navdanya 2007a, 67)

Interestingly, in this list there is no mention of women and no direct explanation as to how these decisions would end up "in women's hands." Furthermore, when Navdanya does attempt to elaborate on the mechanics of this system, they resort to using essentialist language by arguing that women guarantee food security for their communities based on different principles and methods than those governing market-based solutions. In their literature, they list a number of these characteristics that are important to food security – namely, "localization and regionalization, instead of globalization; non-violence instead of aggressive domination; equity and reciprocity instead of competition; respect for the integrity of nature and her species; understanding humans as part of nature instead of as masters of nature; protection of biodiversity in production and consumption" (Navdanya 2007a, 72).

Deccan Development Society and Food Sovereignty

DDS argues that although the discourse of food security has widened to include issues of access for the most marginalized, it still does not take into account the enormous role that bodies like the World Trade Organization and a handful of transnational corporations play in controlling and manipulating global food supplies and standards. DDS has joined NGO's and social movements such as Via Campesina, GRAIN, Brazil's Landless Workers Movement, etc., in pushing for the idea of Food Sovereignty which differentiates itself from both food security and rights based approaches.

They argue that the notion of "food rights" that currently informs multilateral donor organizations and is much talked about in World Food Summits does not directly address the right of local communities to produce their own food and to retain control over their local food systems. It also bypasses issues such as the corporate control over agricultural resources and the economic policies that structure the global food system.

However, while the Deccan Development Society attempts to link their activism to a very emancipatory transnational discourse on Food Sovereignty, contradictions in gender analysis (like in Navdanya) revolve around the issue of land. When asked to whom they would bequeath their land, women members gave similar answers, that they would leave it to their sons. Only sonless women were usually open to endowing daughters. A few wanted to leave their land to all the children but felt that the plot was too small to be divided. And one of the women told me that her daughter could share "her husband's land," so it was not a big issue.[42]

While DDS's efforts have been pioneering in many different ways, it is interesting to note that they have not experimented with any institutional arrangements that would prevent this from being the case. For instance Bina Agarwal writes,

> These problems could be solved, however, through another type of collective functioning, namely, if poor rural women, as a group, held usufruct rights over land distributed by the Government, but not the right to dispose of the land. The daughters-in-law and daughters of such households who are resident in the village would share these use rights. Daughters leaving the village on marriage would lose such rights, but could establish them in their marital village, if a similar arrangement was operating there. (Agarwal, 216)

Given the links that have been shown between gender inequities and lack of property, this might be a good area of future activism for DDS.

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Environmental Impact and Gender

Navdanya has heavily focused on the issue of climate change since 2007. This shift mirrors international developments in the field of global environmentalism. Their analysis of climate change, however, like most mainstream environmental approaches, is largely gender-blind and is heavily focused on the impact of climate change on "the poor."

As it concerns both the environment and climate change, DDS has recently been doing a lot of activism on biofuels. For instance, the Indian government has marked out Jatropha oil as a sustainable feedstock for biofuels production. Proponents of the plan argue that it would not displace food crop production, as it will be grown on what is termed "wasteland." At a workshop that DDS organized in 2007 titled "'Bio' fuels in India. Will they deliver or destroy?" women from the DDS sangams spoke and said that for them no land was useless or without purpose. Even in their small marginal holdings which ranged from one to three acres, they were able to raise up to 22 crops, including a variety of millets, pulses, and oil seeds (Deccan Development Society 2007).

While these are all relevant issues, the omission of feminist analysis from the issue of climate change is a curious one for various reasons. First, the fact that women play a central role in the provision, management, and safeguarding of water is internationally recognized by development bodies. This principle is especially important in developing countries like India where millions of women lack access to water for their basic needs and where social norms often prevent them from accessing water rights to irrigate their fields. It also fails to acknowledge the community irrigation initiatives led

by women that have promoted the sustainable use of irrigation facilities, such as the human-powered treadle pump and rainwater harvesting.

Secondly, studies show that when natural disasters strike, women are the victims in overwhelming numbers. For example, in the 2004 Asian Tsunami, 70-80 percent of overall deaths were women. Lorena Aguilar argues that this is because: a) social and cultural norms prevent women from learning how to swim; b) during emergencies women are less likely to have access to information, as warnings of impending disasters are usually transmitted by men to men in public spaces; c) women tend to have only de facto rights to natural resources such as land, water, and livestock, preventing them from making investments in disaster mitigation strategies (Aguilar 2008).

Finally, a gendered analysis of climate change helps us understand that "one size fits all solutions" such as some kind of romanticized return to Gandhian ideals will not work. Mitigation strategies need to take into account the special vulnerabilities that women face. For example, women in Bangladesh who took part in an action aid study had a clear sense that climate change required them to adopt new agricultural practices. However, feeling that they lacked the capacity to adopt these new practices, they asked for stakeholders such as NGOs to provide training on flood and drought-resistance crops, post-harvesting technologies, and improved animal husbandry (Actionaid 2007).

Conclusion

Many activist groups since the 1990s have found it more politically useful to present themselves as struggling over rights and resources than as groups that are more

connected to the earth in spiritual terms. However, I found that the groups I researched continue to perpetuate certain problematic representations of women.

The main problem I see with these strategies is that they do not propose transformative changes to the structural gendered inequalities in the political and economic system. Even when they articulate the problem at the onset as a structural one, their strategies do not always reflect this understanding. At times, their portrayal of women as inherently close to nature or inherent victims tends to unduly burden women with more work to change their circumstances and less hope of achieving such change. The same essentializing lets men off the hook for working toward progress both for women and themselves. Additionally, the labor of women, and often poor women, is used as an efficient means to correcting environmental problems they did not have the power to create. Activist strategies should be of their own creation, and women should not simply be expected to follow orders handed down by those with more resources.

FPE theorists do a great job of highlighting the problems that ecofeminist theories generate with regards to creating natural linkages between women and the environment. However, in order for this critique to be more effective, FPE theorists need to look more closely at the *strategic* essentialisms of activists as well. It may be true that scholars feel such a critique would do a disservice to activists who may see such essentialism as one of few tools at their disposal to get their voices heard. I contend that it is the responsibility of theorists to look for ways to implement this very important point in ways that enhance the work of activists rather than undermine it.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Introduction

FPE scholars have helped us understand the extent to which gender is salient in the material construction of environmental issues. In this dissertation, I have sought to build on this scholarship by adding a new methodology to the work done by scholars in this field. Employing a methodology that privileges an immanent understanding of the groups' work and strategies enabled me to make two discoveries. The first is that although Navdanya, DDS, and Omon are working on different kinds of issues and adopting different strategies, they are supporting a view of democracy that is more participatory. The second is a way of understanding the strategic essentialisms that these groups use in their activism when addressing issues that are women-specific. I argue that the strategies adopted by these groups prove both beneficial to their communities in some respects and counterproductive in others. The strategies they conceive of with regards to PD have an integrated understanding of gender issues but assume that one can achieve a deeper form of democracy without engaging with the state. Their strategies pertaining to women-focused activism rest on problematic essentialisms and ideas of women as more efficient environmental managers.

Feminist Political Ecology

The framework of FPE has deepened our understanding of the ways in which political structures operate to benefit certain upper class elites, as well as to provide an explanation for women's work on the environment in ways that don't stereotype them as being inherently closer to the environment. For example, if women gather wild foods, this might reflect their lack of access to income from private holdings rather than evidence of women being closer to or synonymous with the environment (Rocheleau and Edmunds 1997).

My contribution to Feminist Political Ecology is an immanent methodology which examines how groups themselves articulate their problems and experiences. Through this research method, scholars can get not only at the material construction of these women's problems but also the influences on and core conceptualization of their activism.

Attending to the way these groups have formulated their strategies adds both the intellectual benefit of a political element to the FPE framework and the ethical benefit of factoring into the overall analysis the real voices of historically marginalized communities.

Engaged Scholarship Revisited

Being a feminist scholar-activist, I have looked to participate in advocacy research and feel an ethical commitment that my work be useful to those engaged in counter-hegemonic struggles. Reflecting on my time working in dialogue and collaboration with these activists, I've singled out some particular methodological

challenges that potentially yield some useful lessons for other scholar-activists working with local community-based groups.

Part of being attentive to their experiences was not only asking open-ended questions and letting women tell their stories, but also actually spend time in their circumstances. This quickly proved to be a humbling experience, as my research skills were completely useless to me within the context of day to day living in the field. This allowed me to see my own privilege as well as the extra burden these women were taking on in their activism.

Not particularly impressed with my academic credentials, the women were less interested that I was there to do research on them and more concerned with how it would be useful to them. Although this was helpful in affirming my commitment to feminist research and the choice of an immanent methodology, reflecting on my time in the field has struck me with two concerns.

First, I am grappling with how to direct the insight that I gained from these activists back to them in a way that benefits their specific communities. Do I simply send them my written work? Do I return to the field and personally share my findings? With all the troubles that Omon has experienced with past researchers, I take this responsibility seriously and have even discussed co-authoring a paper with Xavier Dias about research ethics based on these experiences.

Second, while I feel that my research question did develop out of the needs and experiences these women faced, there were times in which I didn't feel that I could help out in the way I would have liked. During my time with Omon, a woman asked if I could produce research that shows men in their village that it is wrong to beat their wives as

well as to label women as witches and kill them. This is when I felt most inadequate as a researcher. Although realizing the importance of this problem, I felt that I was inadequately positioned to address this in my current research situation and have thought about this since I left the field.

Reflections on Groups' Goals

After writing this dissertation, I realize that my attention to and understanding of the common threads of participatory democracy and women-focused activism in these groups' work was due to the adoption of an immanent methodology in the field.

This immanent methodology was helpful not just in seeing the women's strategies and discourses as they saw them, but seeing the women themselves. It is easy for those who have a voice in society to believe that those without one must have nothing to say. I often think of the words of my translator Dimple, telling me, "I don't think you should ask these women questions like this because they are from the village - what will they know? I mean I live in the town and I don't know anything about this."

I think about how those words sum up the difference between India's version of democracy and the more participatory form of democracy sought by these groups. In this sense, those marginalized and oppressed have a much better understanding of what real democracy looks like than those experiencing the privileges of an uneven democracy.

These women saw their problems as that of being marginalized in the decision-making process and the answer being that marginalized communities should simply be allowed to participate. With this belief at the core of their activism, they came up with a vast array of creative and effective strategies. They integrated gender into their goal of

greater participatory democracy, and when that marginalization was no longer integrated but simply a matter of their being women, they demanded greater gains for women specifically.

Reflections on Problematic Strategies

These strategies of course are not all perfect. Although an immanent methodology allowed me to see how these women conceptualize their problems and strategies, part of my research project was to offer a critical eye to their activism. Having identified potential problems in both their work on participatory democracy and women-focused activism, I have attempted to address the fairness of my criticism.

By identifying as problematic the strategies that lack engagement with state and local governance structures, I am neither defending the state nor suggesting that activists defend the state. My point is not to depict the Indian state as virtuous, but rather to realistically assess its power and political responsiveness.

Unless it is willing to risk altogether losing the description of being titled a democracy, the Indian state has at least some interest in improving the conditions of its citizenry and ensuring some minimum standard of living for people. Engaging with the state emphasizes not just its interest in meeting these minimal requirements but the responsibility to exceed them.

Moreover, if appearing democratic is not important enough to elected officials, there is always the question of violence. In other words, the state has a vested interest in increasing legitimacy so that people don't resort to violence. Moreover, without constant pressure from its citizenry, the people can only expect the state to become less

democratic, less stable, and increasingly violent. There is no reason to believe that violence from either side would mean greater participatory democracy for those already marginalized.

Another issue is outside influence on the state. No matter how democratic the Indian state is, it is still more accountable to the people of India than MNCs, IFIs, and the WTO. With the growth of international decision-making in the age of globalization, it is only in the interests of citizens to lobby the state for stronger representation on the international scene.

Furthermore, there is evidence within India of the potential for participatory democracy within state governance structures. For example, participatory budgeting, one of the most progressive, democratic experiments in the world, is being tried in the Indian state of Kerala (Hahnel 2005). As part of this initiative, power has significantly been allowed to shift from centralized bureaucratic systems to individual villages.

Although I may agree with activists who view India's version of democracy as inadequate and would rather see a more participatory form of democracy, the state exists. If activists are interested in keeping common goods under democratic control, then it will involve some engagement with elected bodies of the state. As long as the state wields power, it will be important for activists to fight for institutionalized mechanisms by which local and national governance structures are more responsive to people in a way that emphasizes democratic values and practices.

As it pertains to these groups' work on women-specific issues, I found both their strategies and the treatment of their strategies by FPE scholars to be paradoxical. For

instance, the literature of Feminist Political Ecology has been critical of ecofeminist scholars essentializing women as being closer to nature. This, on the other hand, is not the case when activists use the same essentialism in their work. In this case, ecofeminism is judged by how it can help activists achieve their goals. If activists see an essentialized category of women as one of their only available tools, FPE scholars do not see it as their place to interrogate or dismantle such strategies. I contend, however, that it is important to be critical of essentialism whenever it is used, not in a way that robs women of gains or makes them appear undeserving but rather in a way that appeals to their status of marginalization.

If, as scholars, we are interested in helping all marginalized communities, we must see how oppression is integrated and be careful not to contribute to such categorized essentialism. For example, because of different essentialisms attributed to Dalits and Adivasis, both marginalized groups have at times been pitted against one another.

I saw this first hand after telling two of the activists at Omon (who were Adivasi) that I was a Dalit. One of the women began talking about agricultural land that had been in her family for decades, later remarking that Dalits usually worked as migrant labor or domestic servants in big cities. I felt after that her attitude towards me had changed.

Such essentialism not only makes it hard for movements to link across identity communities, but also may be used to further essentialize oppressed groups. For instance, if women are seen as closer to nature or more adept at sustainable farming practices, it exempts men from such responsibilities and further burdens women with the implementation of ecological solutions.

This essentialization of women's efficiency ignore men's roles and loses sight of participatory democracy in the formulation of such solutions. While DDS lets women decide which problems they want to address, it is the directors who decide how to address such problems. While Navdanya uses strategic essentialisms in their rhetoric of the food system being "women-led", their solutions do not show how power is put into women's hands.

Even if gains can be won in the short term, using strategic essentialisms sets a dangerous precedent for the future. In other words, essentializations can be used to oppress women much easier when women can also be shown to have embraced them.

Practical Suggestions to Activists

By taking a question that activists themselves might venture to ask and that scholars don't have an adequate answer to, I am trying to identify patterns that have both theoretical value and practical uses. My concern in doing this is primarily with enhancing the work of women's environmental movements in India, some of whose activists shared their hopes, frustrations, and dreams with me. I consider these activists not as subjects but as collaborators in this project and hope that they can learn from this analysis as I have learned (and continue to learn) from their work.

I started this dissertation with a discussion about the ethical and political commitments that I as a feminist researcher bring to my research. One of these political commitments is to address issues in my research that might be strategically important for strengthening women's movements towards social change. Feminist scholarship has done a great deal in pushing the legitimacy of problem-driven research within the confines of the academy, but it has also cautioned us to reflect deeply about questions of what we are able to see

from our political and social positions and also how we analyze and interpret what we see. I have tried to take their cautions seriously in this research and am aware that my account is also a particular perspective that falls short of telling the complete story (Harding 1987; Mohanty 2003). Selecting a research question and methodology that has contemporary relevance is not particularly unusual for feminist researchers, but in recent times a shift towards this type of problem-driven research has shown up in writings by more mainstream political scientists.

For instance, Ian Shapiro, in his 2005 book *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences*, criticizes the increasing distance between the actual "objects of research" and social science research design. His core argument is that scholars need to conduct research in a problem/question driven manner rather than a method or theory driven style (Shapiro 2005). He writes,

> …. one central task for political theorists should be to identify, criticize and suggest plausible alternatives to the theoretical assumptions, interpretations of political conditions, and above all the specifications of problems that underlie prevailing empirical accounts and research programs – and to do it in ways that spark novel and promising problem-driven research agendas. (Shapiro 2005, 180)

I have attempted to adopt these methods in my dissertation. With this in mind, I offer two suggestions to the movement.

Enlist the State as an Ally

Environmental problems are transnational in nature. The solutions that they require call on us to have a shared sense of global responsibility that is not constrained to state boundaries. It is widely recognized that states have not been the best ally of the environmental activist (or any social justice activist for that matter). And yet, states are

unique institutions in that they have the legitimate power of coercion necessary to mobilize resources to change and improve systems (Eckersley 2004). They also have a recognized legitimate role in international negotiations.

While engaging transnational donors and using global discourses are important strategies for groups, they should not be done at the expense of engaging with and strengthening a more democratic state. Many activists might find the idea of strengthening the state as problematic, however reclaiming these institutions on behalf of democratic principles is important in achieving their long-term goals.

Linking with Social Justice Groups

Women's environmental groups in India have attempted to link their struggles with labor, indigenous, and land rights movements, but there is clearly more work to be done in these areas. The essentializing strategies that these groups use with regards to women do not necessarily lead to effective coalition building, and mainstream women's organizations in India have been slow to take on the environmental challenge.

One activist I spent time with at the World Social Forum in 2007 pointed out that this was because most feminists in India regard women and environmental issues as tied to old "essentializing" debates regarding whether women were closer to nature than men. This is a debate that many feminist activists find problematic and are reluctant to bring up. Fortunately, there are some signs that these issues are being taken up by Indian feminists. At the feminist dialogues that preceded the 2007 WSF, in a panel titled Feminist Visions, Kamala Bhasin, a prominent Indian feminist, spoke of "Earth Democracy" and the ways in which climate change was impacting on women's lives and

the need for women activists to take environmental concerns seriously in their activism (Feminist Dialogues 2007).

Directions for Future Research

My use of immanent methodology helped me to understand the ways in which these women activists conceptualize their problems. What I was not able to do was gather systematic evidence of how much influence outside factors had on the choice of certain strategies, in particular the ones I found paradoxical. Based on my analysis of these organizations, I have identified three factors that might explain why certain strategic choices may seem compelling in the face of potential contradictions. In the section below, I offer specific comments and questions that might be useful in future research on this subject. The first three issues - donor support, community support, and political climate - come from my experiences with Navdanya, DDS, and Omon but could easily be applied to women's environmental groups anywhere. The last issue, elite forms of environmental discourse, is one I see having a much greater influence in the future and contributing to the dangerous essentialism of marginalized communities being implementers of policies formulated by those with more power in the social hierarchy.

Donor Support

As donor support is important to the functioning of a non-governmental organization, should it be allowed to dictate the agenda of the group? Or should the activists' focus be on building domestic alliances and support for their movements rather

than towards pleasing donor expectations. Out of these broad concerns, specific questions arise for the groups I researched.

For instance, how does donor influence differ between a small, under resourced group like Omon in comparison to a well-funded group like Navdanya? How do donor reports affect the strategies employed by activists, in particular ones that demand quantifiable data with regards to the population the NGO is serving? How does the charismatic leadership of someone like Vandana Shiva affect fundraising? How does receiving funds from the state to aid DDS's Alternative Public Distribution System affect their political engagement with the state? How do current trends in funding, like that of Climate Change, affect the frameworks employed?

One area of donor support that sparked my interest was that many of these groups' transnational donors tend to be religious in orientation. Does this type of support influence the severity of the gendered critique within these organizations? In the case of DDS, the Church Development Service, an association of the Protestant Churches in Germany (EED), provides a great deal of the group's funding. Do the politics within such funding organizations have any effect on how women are portrayed in the feminist discourse of these groups?

Community Support

Beyond donor support, both DDS and Omon’s organizational structures require that they have members to whom they are accountable. One of the ways in which DDS shores up their legitimacy and ensures that they have community support is through instituting programs like the Alternative Public Distribution System. In the face of a

healthcare crisis in the region, Omon's work in creating an alternative health program, while not being the success they would like, has gained them popular support among community members. In its Food Sovereignty campaigns, Navdanya depends on a Gandhian framework to garner community support.

By relying on such community support, are there certain constraints as to the frames and discourses activist groups can take? Do communities tolerate certain work from organizations because they do not rock the boat? What happens if the group decides to go further than what the community leaders are comfortable with? Are there cases in which community support could be a liability in terms of holding a group's work back?

For instance, because Indian communities are often both class/caste differentiated and highly gendered, does this impinge on the kind of institutional reforms that can be successful and effective? Knowing that radical notions of women's empowerment would get them little traction in many communities, do groups settle for an essentialized discourse on women as a compromise in order to fulfill their commitments to achieve greater material equity? If the community overall can benefit from the gains made by women but the power hierarchies stay largely in tact, is this not too great a compromise of feminist values?

Political Climate

Even if organizations could get the full support of the community in whatever endeavors they propose, how does the political climate factor into their choice of strategies? Subject to intimidation and death threats on a regular basis, the activists at Omon believe that Jharkhand is essentially a corporate state and find it difficult to push

for effective governance at a transnational or local level. Such restrictions have forced Omon's members to see the creation of a private health governance structure as one of their only available options. This is not the case with DDS and Navdanya, who do work in a relatively open political atmosphere. However, both organizations show degrees of reluctance when it comes to engaging with the state.

Furthermore, India is still a deeply patriarchal society. Pushing for more radical and transformative changes in gender relations would not be easily tolerated. Consequently, do groups find themselves projecting an image of women that resonates with the popular imagination? As the government tends to be suspicious of foreign donors forcing so-called Western values upon the local population, does this cast a shadow over certain feminist analyses?

Elite Forms of Environmental Discourse

One last direction I would propose for future research is the rise of elite forms of environmental discourse. India's middle class constitutes a significant portion of the political population. Responsible for a significant rise in vehicle emissions and waste production, they are also responsible for the circulation of new more authoritarian forms of environmental discourses in urban areas.

Scholars such as Amita Baviskar and Ramachandra Guha term this development as the rise of "bourgeois environmentalism" (Baviskar 2002; Baviskar 2007; Guha 1997). They point to a distinct social group – professionals holding jobs as university lecturers, bankers, and journalists – as perpetuating this bourgeois form of environmentalism. They differentiate this type of environmentalism from the environmentalism of the poor.

Baviskar writes, “For the bourgeois environmentalist, the ugliness of production must be removed from the city. Smokestack industries, effluent-producing manufacturing units and other aesthetically unpleasant sites that make the city a place of work for millions, should be discreetly tucked away out of sight, polluting some remote rural wasteland. So must workers who labour in these industries be banished out of sight” (Baviskar 2002, 42).

This development is problematic as it cedes important political ground to elite notions of environmentalism. This form of environmentalism is part and parcel of a larger trend that has accompanied the current phase of economic liberalization, that is, the shrinking of the public sphere and the increasing exclusion of marginalized groups from public discourse. Political analysts have noted that conflicts over land and environmental resources have always been central to the challenges of development in India. However, India is at a particularly important political moment in its history. Neoliberal reforms have led to the rolling back of progressive politics even in states that have been politically left such as West Bengal and Kerala. Activists need to be cognizant of these trends and enlist not only the state to further its cause but to also make sure that their strategies target urban populations and make them their allies. Scholars need to be critical of these trends and support grassroots activists in their fight for greater stake in the formulation of solutions.

Final Thoughts

In all three case studies, I have found that activists fighting specific local environmental harms and against destructive development in general have come up with

some important and creative solutions. Activists on the ground are acutely aware of the overwhelming challenges they face and are working towards combating them. However, the urgency of fighting on all fronts reconciles problems with strategies that are sometimes at odds with their aims. I have attempted to highlight some of these inconsistencies with the hope that these movements can benefit from this analysis and grow stronger in their fight for environmental justice.

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