
India: Women's knowledge and power in forest societies

Regarding women's indigenous knowledge, apart from a few ethnographic and anthropological studies, little consideration had been given by early androcentric-biased anthropologists, ecologists and environmentalists to the gender dimension of indigenous knowledge systems.

It was not until the mid-seventies, when the myths associated with such stereotypical thinking were unmasked, that feminist scholarship turned its attention to the knowledge systems of women. Now, acknowledgment is increasingly being given to the role played by women in many communities as the primary natural resource managers due to their intimate knowledge of the environment that enables them to maintain livelihoods, cultural continuity and community cohesion.

Before the advent of state pressure on matrilineal societies, gender relations were relatively equal. Based on women's role in production, their special knowledge of forests, and their place in the cultural and religious life of matrilineal communities, women enjoyed considerable space within the household and the community to make decisions about resource use.

In the Chota Nagpur villages of Central India, present day practices socially acknowledge women's knowledge of forests and agriculture. When the Munda (the headmen) go from one village to another, their wives lead them. Women's knowledge of seeds, herbs, and plants is considered precious both in the family and community. Their knowledge of the roots of a particular plant is used to brew rice beer, the most sacred and popular drink of the people.

Their role in the preparation of cultivable land is also very important; they are seen working with men in field preparation and reclamation of forest land. Women's contribution to the development of agriculture is further confirmed by the 'myth of the preparation of the first plough.' The Supreme Being's wife is described as the real inventor of the technology of ploughmaking. Thus women's right to land and its produce received a permanent place in the customary law of the Munda people.

Unfortunately, maintaining this position of power has been difficult for women, particularly in the face of pressures from the state in favor of centralizing forest management, weakening an important source of women's power in matrilineal societies.

While women certainly continued to use forests after centralization, they often had to do so clandestinely and in short visits. In addition, many forests were changed into monocrops that provided few of the resources that women controlled historically. With limited access to a much altered forest, women's ability to fend off forces of patriarchy was much reduced.

State efforts to centralize forest management did not go unopposed. Yet these movements did not often reassert women's equal rights with respect to forest management, or any other aspect of social life for that matter. A shift in gender power from women to men was already well underway when such movements got started, and local men used the moment to further consolidate patriarchy. In the process of changing forest use, from swidden systems to settled, privately-owned fields, and the change from community access to private access to forest products, women had lost the source of

their power and status. Men were fighting for the return of forests, not gender equality.

However, that situation is changing and women's inclusion in committees is becoming more a policy norm. In many places, all-women groups have come up for forest management and protection. Women are seen to perform better in many management and production tasks. But these new norms of women's inclusion, though still limited in space both vertically and horizontally, have also come about through a process of struggle by women, often supported by various external actors.

Article based on information from: "Patriarchy at Odds: Gender Relations in Forest Societies in Asia", Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan (Eds.), 2003, <http://www.gendermainstreamingasia.org/img/b1.PDF>; Women's indigenous knowledge of forest management in Orissa (India), Smita Mishra, <http://www.nuffic.nl/ciran/ikdm/2-3/articles/mishra.html>