

Understanding the Entanglements of Ecofeminism, Food, and Place: An Indian Perspective

*Elisa Mohanty**

Abstract

Ecofeminism examines issues at the intersections of gender and environment. It equates the subordination of women with the exploitation of nature. This study is premised on secondary literature. Utilizing the lenses of Chaone Mallory's (2013) encounters between ecofeminism, food, and place, it examines such entanglements from an Indian perspective. Drawing on studies conducted in the Indian context, it brings forth the promises and challenges afforded by ecofeminist representations of environmental issues. It acknowledges the role of women in local communities as repositories of indigenous knowledge systems and living embodiments of sustainable environmental practices. It calls forth the need to strike at the roots of their oppression to solicit their enhanced participation in environmental conservation. Running through the oeuvre of this analysis is a passionate plea to reflexively engage with local knowledge systems, which are often dismissed as irrational and unscientific by dominant paradigms of development.

Keywords: Anthropocene, ecofeminism, gender, environment, food practices, place

*Assistant Professor (Corresponding author), Department of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, Central University of Odisha, NAD, Sunabeda, Koraput, Odisha

Email ID: emohanty@cuo.ac.in

Human activity has come to have an unprecedented impact on our biodiversity and ecosystems. The geological era of the Anthropocene that we live in characterizes the broad ramifications of anthropogenic activities on the environment. Duara (2021) observes that we are already invaded by apocalyptic visions in climate fiction and films of “select few” colonizing our planet leading to its collapse. At the same time, the ground realities talk about climate refugees fleeing their original habitats for literal and metaphorical “higher grounds”.

Even within these real-life scenarios of environmental hazards confronting us, the impact may be differential when analysed through the intersectional lenses of race, caste, class, and gender. Ecofeminism is one such lens that discusses issues at the intersections of gender and environment. It explores the close interconnections between women and nature, especially unearthing their exploitation and subordination in a patriarchal society (Singh, 2019).

The ecological perspective envisaged by ecofeminism is a more nuanced lens for critical analyses of the era of the Anthropocene as compared to the vantage point of environmentalism steeped in science. Visvanthan’s (2001) remarks in this context assume poignancy wherein he critiques the managerial framework of science. According to him, environmentalism is rooted in two axioms that seek to establish the hegemony of science. One of these axioms, which he regards as the “immaculate conception of science”, believes that scientific and rational knowledge systems hold the potential to solve the problems of inequality and starvation. The second axiom that he calls the “doctrine of the fall” says that science has been unable to live up to its promised potential as it has bowed to the pressures of consumerism, leading to excessive militarization and environmental degradation.

The ecological critique contests the monolithic world orders created by science. It strikes at the roots of “one nation, one science” worldviews by recognizing the salience of

local knowledge and the wisdom of ethnicities that have guaranteed the survival of tribal and peasant communities for generations (Visvanathan, 2001).

This study is based on secondary literature. It draws on Chaone Mallory's (2013) analysis of encounters between ecofeminism, food and place to examine how such entanglements play out in the Indian context. The following sections discuss the potential of ecofeminism as a viable tool contesting development-based marginalisations and explore the interlinkages between ecofeminism, food, place, and gender. They reveal the gendered nature of the food practices of local communities in India. Also discussed are ecofeminism's potential to reveal exclusions through the food experiences of communities and the inequities inherent in ecofeminist representations of environmental issues.

Ecofeminism: Seeking Kinship with Nature to Contest Development

Ecofeminism embeds the philosophy of environmentalism and feminism. Environmentalism opposes the harm caused by human beings (anthropogenic agents) to the non-human natural world and the biodiversity of planet Earth. Feminism contests the oppressions rooted in women's life experiences and the subordination of other social groups. Ecofeminism traces the similarities in the material and conceptual roots of gendered oppressions and environmental degradations. It also critically analyses how such oppressions reinforce each other (Mallory, 2013).

Ecofeminism establishes linkages between the subordination of nature and women. It believes that the categories that label women inferior also apply to nature. For example, the criteria of lower rationality, high emotionality and instincts of animality and embodiment characterise both nature and women. On the other hand, the privileged categories of maleness or masculinity are associated with rationality and the primacy of mind over spirit (Mallory, 2013). Ecofeminist theory emphasises the links between development and gender. It explores

how violence against nature and women is embedded in prevailing development paradigms (Rao, 2012).

Shiva (1988) asserts that with the onslaught of development, there is a simultaneous impairment of women's productivity and loss of the ecosystem's regenerative capabilities. Thus, gender subordination and patriarchy manifest in virulent forms through development projects. Notions of economic growth, progress, and development seek refuge in fragmentation and uniformity. They remain deliberately oblivious to the destructive effects of production and relegate life regeneration to the annals of passivity. These projects misconstrue women and nature as representatives of passivity, thus undermining the living forces that sustain diversity.

Ecofeminists believe a feminist perspective is critical in ameliorating the global environmental crisis. Our attitudes towards nature are dominated by Western-centric value systems of domination, exploitation, and control. They call forth the need to substitute such self-aggrandizing value systems with the more life-affirming values of mutuality, nurturance, and care (Mallory, 2013). They uphold the interconnectedness of all life processes and thus deride the human control of nature. They believe that humans should work harmoniously with nature and attempt to transcend power hierarchies (Rao, 2012).

Situating Ecofeminism's Entanglements with Food Practices

Ecofeminism has deep interlinkages with our food practices, viz., the production, distribution and consumption of food (Kikon, 2021; Mallory, 2013). Food is regarded as a marker of social identity. A diet is associated with class, ethnic, and religious identification, prescription of gender roles, and embodiment in manners and rituals. It also exemplifies our urge for perfection. Food and drink intimately entwine with and signify our desires, anxieties, memories, pleasures, and pride in and estrangement from our heritage (Kaplan, 2011).

Kannampilly (2006) asserts that food is a social marker. The food preferences of brides and bridegrooms are spelt out in the classified sections of matrimonial advertisements. Even the restaurant menus and our everyday conversations are incipient with categorizations of food as vegetarian and non-vegetarian. Vegetarianism is often regarded as a mark of the perfect human being. Non-vegetarianism leads to ghettoization, with people observing a nonvegetarian diet often considered to be outside the narrow circle of perfection. Thus, food as a sign of social marker is also a sign of stigma and status.

The intersections between ecofeminism and food practices discuss how the sourcing and consumption of specific food items lend credence to notions of identity, culture, and meaning-making. An ecofeminist perspective is sensitive to the fact that the sites of production and consumption of local foods are places where the identities of “us” and “other” are continuously renegotiated. Ecofeminism helps us analyze the ecosocial relations embedded in and constitutive of our relationship with food (Mallory, 2013).

Ecofeminism, Food and the Centrality of Place

Landscape is an integral component of ecosystems and communities. The lands and forests are key elements of what the local communities and tribes refer to as their space. These spaces are pivotal to the livelihood and lifeways of those inhabiting them. Also embedded in them are stories of their struggles, resistance, and survival. The spatial and temporal contexts of people are pregnant-with-meaning. Space is a living force embedded in history, and the artefacts of the space have stories of their own (Umamaheshwari, 2021). A sense of place, according to food anthropologist Laura DeLind (2006), refers to the spatial relationships that connect people to a shared sense of belonging.

A place is imbricated in ethical relationships with the natural world beyond human beings. It acts as a viable ground for the unfolding of relationships between beings, entities,

and the environment. The philosophy of place links questions of relationality and interconnectedness to specific geographic locations. Place signifies the ecosocial relationships of a physical locale with its socio-historical, ecological, and cultural context. Anthropogenic activities like the production and consumption of food depend upon what is permissible by the natural characteristics of the place (Mallory, 2013).

Our bodies encounter places through food practices. The practices of production, purchase, preparation and partaking of food impart an embodied experience of place. They reveal an important epistemological function of food, i.e. food as a way of knowing a place. Exploring the embodied experiences of people with regard to the production, consumption, and distribution of food reveals the class, gendered, and racial exclusions inherent in our food practices. Ecofeminism in conjunction with the philosophy of place demonstrates how our social encounters with food are replicated. However, it does not just stop at such analyses. It also represents the politics of hope and attempts to demonstrate how our food practices can be a source of transforming a place. Thus, ecofeminism concomitantly represents the eco-social relations embedded in a place and its transformative potential (Mallory, 2013).

The Question of Gender in Ecofeminism's Encounters with Food and Place

Gender constitutes an important lens through which we analyse how food is a social marker, shaping our identities and prescribing social roles. Mallory (2013) notes that the different relationships men and women share with food shapes their roles, identities, and relationships. This also accounts for the differential access and meanings attributed to the process of eating. Gender also affords us a powerful lens to assess the differences in division of labor with regard to production, distribution, and consumption of food.

Shiva (1988) reflects that from the logic of development, the significant components of nature viz., women, peasant communities, and tribal societies are undervalued and deemed

to be unproductive as they produce just enough for sustenance and are dependent on nature's cycles of agricultural production for renewability and replenishment. Thus, commodity production unmediated by technological interventions becomes "unproductive". Natural forests underutilize their potential unless developed into spaces for commercial production. We may infer that any work categorized as unproductive does not trace a direct linkage to profits and capital.

The following sub-section reveals the gendered negotiations between ecofeminism, food, and place from the lenses of mythological tales prevalent among people, tribes, and local communities.

Ecofeminism, Food, and Place: The Lens of Mythology

Tribal mythologies and folklores reflect the interactions between food practices and the philosophy of place. The primacy of gender in such narratives also becomes apparent. Ariina (2019) discussed the popular myth called *The Saga of Woman*, prevalent among the Naga communities of North East India. The myth unravels how, at a certain point of time in history, the Naga communities were so indulgent in hunting (especially pidu piva or headhunting) that they forgot the temporal and other viable conditions for sowing paddy seeds. They would either sow them too early or too late, and the paddy plants would not be able to bear grains. Eventually, they also lost the agricultural seeds used in cultivation, especially the paddy seeds (*otho mati*) and millet seeds (*osütho mati*) quintessential for food security and survival. The elders of the Naga villages were told that they would be able to get this knowledge and the seeds from a village named *Tamarimei*, about 30 – 50 kilometres away. However, after the arduous journey to Tamarimei (possibly located in present-day Manipur), crossing high peaked mountains, the Naga people were refused access to the seeds and associated knowledge by the villagers. However, they were helped by a Mao Naga lady

who was married to a renowned warrior of Tamarimei. She gifted them a rooster (*Hodzü kajü*) fed with paddy and millet seeds and advised them to kill it and extract the seeds on reaching their village gate. Likewise, she also sang a lullaby to her kid, having secretly advised the villagers to decode its meaning to extract information on the time of sowing paddy seeds.

Myths around fermentation also highlight the process of gendering. Kikon (2021) recounts one such myth on the preparation of kahuna (fermented soybeans) prevalent among the Sumi Naga communities. The tale is about a young woman who was often left starving by her stepmother, who denied her access to food. One day, she decided to cook a pot of soya beans in the fields she cultivated. That day, she ate comfortably, wrapped the leftovers in a leaf, and stored it in a haystack. After some days, when she returned to the field, she found that the soybean had fermented and assumed a sticky and flavorful taste. From then on, she regularly added fermented soya beans to her diet, which enhanced her beauty. She grew beautiful and married into a wealthy family. Kikon also pointed out that this showed the valuations that communities of shifting cultivators placed on fermented food. The reason why such narratives are often not reflected in the food cultures of communities is that the dominant frameworks about food practices revolve around settled agriculture.

The trope of “Goddess Earth or Earth/Mountain deities” is also invoked to chronicle the relationships of local communities with food practices, especially agriculture. This trope is often appropriated in environmental movements. The tribes inhabiting the Niyamgiri Hills of Odisha had a distinct vision of agriculture (Krishnan, 2021; Krishnan & Naga, 2017). Before embarking on agriculture in the hills, the local communities hold rituals to appease the earth and mountain deities by offering them animal sacrifices. Herein, agriculture is not framed as a natural right of these communities but rather an act of transgression, trespassing, for which permission is sought from other stakeholders of the mountain ecosystem.

International environmental movements deployed these mythologies to enable local communities to secure their indigenous rights over the mountains and prevent the encroachment of industries in the name of development (Borde, 2019). At specific strategic points in time, the environmental resistance in Niyamgiri emphasized the “sacred” and the “spiritual”. The emotive performances of indigeneity play a crucial role in framing discourses around ecology. Rituals of the Dongria Kondh tribal groups inhabiting the Niyamgiri Hills are addressed to the Niyam Raja, or Mountain God protecting the Hills and his wife, Dharani Pennu, or Earth Goddess, who controls the agricultural cycles of sowing, cultivation, and harvest. Underlying the material reality of notions of “sacredness” is the belief that the forces of nature, viz., the mountains, the earth, and the rivers, play a significant role in the sustenance of local communities (Krishnan & Naga, 2017).

An analysis of these mythological tales reveals how the folklores and myths that are part of the oral traditions of local communities acknowledge the centrality of women and nature in conservation of the ecosystem. Often, these traditional systems of knowledge, the living archives and repositories of local communities are considered to be beyond the purview of scientific rationality. Their role as pivotal tools for redressing environmental injustices becomes apparent in their appropriation in environmental movements. The ensuing sub-section chronicles the significant role played by women in the food practices of local communities.

The Role of Women in Food Practices

Ecofeminism, in its entanglements with food and place, asks the questions of who farms, who cooks, who eats, who manages waste, who trades, who profits, and so on. Exploring these questions reveals the gendered nature of our food practices.

Kikon (2021) explored the associative relationships between fermenting flavors and identities in Northeast India. While fermented foods constitute an important aspect of Indian cuisine, they are also central to the food cultures of different states and regions in the Northeastern part of the country, where fermented vegetables, fish, beans, and rice add to the diversity of prevalent food traditions. Usually, the fermentation takes place in small-scale, non-industrialized settings like family kitchens. Kikon also observed that the process of fermenting is highly gendered. The women of Northeast India primarily act as repositories of skills and knowledge of fermentation across communities. The Apatani tribal women of Arunachal Pradesh line their bamboo baskets with banana leaves before fermenting the bamboo shoots. The Adi women wrap the bamboo shoots in banana leaves and place them beneath stones near water bodies like streams and ponds. The Meitei women of Manipur ferment freshly chopped and sundried bamboo shoots in clay pots. However, they do not wash these bamboo shoots in order to retain the flavour and taste. The Khasi women of Meghalaya ferment bamboo shoots in glass jars and bamboo baskets. The women of the Barman community in Tripura add fresh bamboo shoots to a fish preparation called Godhak (Kikon, 2021; Singh et al., 2007).

Samal et al. (2019) discussed the agricultural practices of the Adi shifting cultivators in the hills of Arunachal Pradesh. The Adis are an important tribal community inhabiting central Arunachal Pradesh. The central regions of Arunachal Pradesh hold ecological significance as they are characterised by rich biodiversity and provide a range of ecosystem services to the lowland regions. It is interesting to note that the Adis utilise weeds that are considered a threat to the growth of crops to the benefit of the ecosystem. Upland agriculture faces the problem of maximum run-off. Therefore, the Adis deploy the technique of *Panpeng/Paneng*, wherein they use logs along hill gradients to prevent runoff during the rainy season. The Adis being excellent weed managers, mulch weeds on the Panpeng bunds.

Moreover, when these weeds are burnt in the crop fields, the ashes (*Mekor*) contribute organic manure to the soil. Samal et al. observed that women of the Adi communities are the primary workforce and champions of weed management practices, although men contribute to it in their free time.

Norberg-Hodge (2022) discussed how the onslaught of the forces of globalization marginalised the local food practices of the people of Ladakh in India. Traditional Ladakhi farming and food systems ensured the sustainability of the local communities where the sun was the primary source of energy, spurring the growth of plants, labor power, and pristine natural waters for irrigation and milling. The minerals from the melting glaciers and the abundance of compost and manure ensured the fertility of the fields and crops. The farmers conserved the field through rotational grazing and were mindful of protecting even the minutest species. The ecological footprint measured regarding the total ecological impact (including energy and water consumption and waste generation) was very low. She observed that these community-based farming and food systems were solar-powered, had negligible reliance on external input, and generated minimal wastage. The Ladakhis liked to call themselves '*za-bos thung-bos*', which meant being self-reliant in food and drink. However, the local food cultures degraded with exposure to the forces of modernity, globalization, and mass tourism. Ladakh lost self-reliance on basic foods and became import-dependent. Norberg-Hodge chronicled the efforts of grassroots initiatives in pushing against the tide of development and creating flourishing alternatives. She herself became part of the movement and founded the *Ladakh Ecological Development Group* and *Women's Alliance of Ladakh*. These groups promote renewable energy, sustainable farming, and respect for Ladakhi culture. They create awareness among the villagers through meetings, seminars, and conferences on the harmful effects of processed foods and the health benefits of local alternatives.

This sub-section chronicled the central role played by women in food practices and environmental sustainability. The concluding sub-section exhorts us to see ecofeminism as a double-edged weapon: On one hand, it brings to our consciousness the marginalization inherent in the politics of food and place, while on the other, it also familiarizes us with the shortcomings of ecofeminist representations.

Ecofeminism and Exclusions: A Critique

The sites of local food practices are spaces where social identities are constantly made and remade regarding who is “us” and who are the “others”. Kikon (2021) discussed how experiences of smell shape citizenship practices in India. The fermented food cultures provide an opportunity to examine how people's private and subjective taste preferences are associated with citizens' socio-political worlds. The smelly food and sour taste associated with fermented food cultures lead us to affectivities emanating from shared feelings and experiences of different ethnic groups. The different ways in which bamboo shoots are fermented in Northeast India are a reflection of the ethnic communities who sell and eat it. It is ethnic bodies that carry and sell bamboo shoots and keep fermenting cultures alive. Apart from fermented bamboo shoots, *akhuni* (fermented soya beans), *ngari* (fermented fish), and *anishi* (fermented yam cakes) are some of the popular delicacies from Northeast India. However, when migrants from Northeast India cook such food on the mainland, it may evoke feelings of disgust and racism. Over the years, these communities have developed ways to suppress their culinary identities by attempting in numerous ways to mute the strong scents emanating from fermented food. Thus, tracing the food cultures and fermentation practices of communities of Northeast India reveals deeper meanings about gender, ethnicity, social relations and taste. In this rare entanglement of smell and the aesthetics of senses, the stinky odour of fermented food not only evokes emotional attachment and longing for one's community and home but also leads to the production of alliances and differences.

Baviskar (2005) discussed the limitations of ecological and ecofeminist representations of environmental movements. The process of labelling a social movement as environmental involves making claims in ways that are both facilitative and impeding. The representation of social movements as environmentalists has emerged from dialectical encounters with varied groups of supporters within the movement. These unequally situated actors engage in an ongoing process of dialogue, giving salience to multiple contending meanings and newer understandings.

Baviskar (2005) pointed out that there may be a way in which movements like the Chipko or Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) have drifted from the core concerns of ecology and women's rights in the manner in which they are represented. She brings forth the differential meanings attributed to environmental struggles in the case of the anti-dam movement, the NBA. She goes on to note that there is a difference in perception between various stakeholders regarding the reasons for joining the movement. For example, the people feel that they are fighting for basic livelihood, survival, and subsistence, which are denied to them by the state. The intellectuals project the indigenous resistance as a comprehensive critique of development. This critique of development is rooted in the indigenous tribal (Adivasi) way of life characterised by simplicity and harmonious coexistence with nature as opposed to the dominant and Western-centric worldview of mastery over nature and material wealth. She highlighted that the urban supporters of the NBA focused on the issue of displacement of the tribal people as combining the concerns of equity with ecology. However, it strayed the focus away from the ecological impacts of the dam, for example, on the command area and downstream ecosystems.

Baviskar (2005) also discussed how, due to the massive participation of women, the Chipko Movement was labelled as "ecofeminist". After the devastating floods of 1970s, the "ecological" meanings attributed to the movement intensified as it brought into the public

consciousness the linkages between large-scale destruction of forests and natural calamities like floods, soil erosion, and landslides. However, the protests, rallies and demonstrations assumed a more political character accompanied by state repression. In one such instance, there was violent suppression of women protestors in Muzaffarnagar in 1994. Since the 1990s, the movement became increasingly distanced from ecological concerns and assumed a more political tone in demanding regional autonomy for the state of Uttaranchal. Thus, the so-called “environmental movements” may bring together disparate social groups with contradictory structural locations and varied class backgrounds whose practices will not espouse the philosophy and cause of environmental sustainability.

Baviskar (2002) has pointed out the differences in environmental discourses of Global South and Global North. The narratives of Global South emphasize the ‘environmentalism of the poor’, with a focus on nature as a means of production of both material and symbolic value. It is contrasted with the Green movements of the North, where nature is primarily acknowledged as a site of consumption. Certain kinds of the portrayal of the local people as “ecologically wise hill people” gain more traction and sympathy for their rights as compared to their representation as poor people who rely on ecological resources and are forced to exploit them to make ends meet. She notes that bourgeois environmentalism has emphasised the cause of the “ecologically virtuous”, viz., the Adivasis, the fishing communities, and the hill women. However, it has also eclipsed the voices of many others, viz., the large sections of urban and rural property-less workers who are poor but whose livelihood practices may be regarded as causing damage to ecology and the environment. She also notes the reason why labelling the tribal people as “environmentalists” is problematic. Their resource use may be less damaging to the environment as compared to the larger players like big industries and corporates. Nevertheless, it fails to provide them with sustainable livelihoods and secured sources of employment. She questions the politics of place that lends credence to the rights

over resources for some sections of the poor over others. The control over space entails ordering rural and urban spaces in a manner that the threat of encountering sights and smells representing dismal poverty, squalor, crime and disease is reduced. The profound irony in seeking to make invisible the people and places who are indispensable for affluent consumption is rarely acknowledged.

Conclusion

This study analyzed ecofeminism's encounters with food and place from an Indian perspective. It showed how the food practices of different groups and communities of Indians are gendered. It reflected the possibilities afforded by the lenses of ecofeminism to expose inequalities in food practices. At the same time, it discussed the shortcomings of ecofeminist representations in romanticizing and privileging certain sections of communities vulnerable to environmental risks over others. In doing so, it brought forth the significance of our indigenous knowledge systems and local cultures in environmental conservation. Moreover, women of local communities being the repositories of such knowledge and living embodiments of practices of sustainability necessitates their effective participation in environmental conservation efforts at all levels (national, state, and local), including policymaking and implementation. This also requires us to reflexively engage and strike at the very roots of societal norms and practices that lead to the subordination of women and nature.

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