UNIT 4  WOMEN’S VOICE AND STRUGGLE

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Structure

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

Gender gap in development indicators and the modern process of development are closely linked with each other in India. The process of development in India, in many cases, has led to immense hardship for the tribal and agrarian societies and consequently has affected the lives of rural and tribal women. Mining, industrialization and displacement have led to large scale migration and trafficking in women, leading to their sexual exploitation. The various mining and industrial/development projects in the mineral rich tribal area have deprived women of their economic security and access to land as well as common property resources. In most cases, the land acquisition process for various developmental projects has deprived them from decision making about their own lives and livelihood. Rehabilitation has uprooted them from their own socio-cultural milieu to difficult and alien surroundings causing cultural and psychological problems. The breakdown of community life and means of livelihood has led to the denial of basic necessities of life and exploitation of these women.

The above is related to a rising unrest among the tribes in general and the women in particular against the process of development going on in India. Movement and uprising against displacement and mining activities are noticed along the length and breadth of this country. In this unit we will focus on the situation of tribal women in the context of modern political economy highlighting their exploitation, voice and struggle against it.
4.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Understand the relationship between forest, women and development;
- Comprehend tribal women’s voice and struggle in pre-independent India;
- Analyze the causes of protest and struggle by tribal women in India; and
- Examine the link between development and women through the stories of tribal women’s protest and struggle.

4.3 TRIBES, WOMEN AND FOREST

The majority of Indian tribes are forest-based. In India, forest has been a vital source of civilisational, intellectual and spiritual development of human society. In contemporary India, many tribal groups still carry forward with them this vital tradition of living with nature which is expressed in their daily activities and beliefs. Moreover, the relationship between forest and women has been a strong one both in practice and theory. Forest has been associated with fertility. According to Vandana Shiva, the forest as the highest expression of the earth’s fertility and productivity and is symbolised in the form as Vana Durga or the Tree Goddess. In many tribal villages in India even today, we can see one or two sacred grooves which are patches of land left uncut when a village is established after cutting trees in a forest. Various studies have shown that this reverence for forest or trees is due to an ecological insight that is deep and inherited through many generations(Gadgil 1975; Gadgil, Vartak, 1995; Ramakrishnan, 1996, 1998; Ramakrishnan et al. 1998). Myers also emphasized this relationship between ecology and community (Myers, 1984). The practice of indigenous knowledge system reflects living in ‘harmony’ with nature (Elwin, 1943, 1936). Some scholars (Elwin, 1935; Anderson and Huber, 1988; Sen, 1992; Guha, 2001) have taken this argument further to expose the indigenous communities’ appreciation of nature, which was shaped over generations by living in the forests.

In most part of tribal India, women play a very vital role in forest related activities. It is the women who collect raw materials from the forest as well as prepare and sell handia (rice beer) which is considered as a very special drink having ritual significance in many parts of tribal India. The raw material is mohua tree which is found in the forest. Women collect various parts of the mohua tree to use for various purposes. Forest management and knowledge about use of forest produce has been basically a domain of women.
Women’s participation in tribal economy is crucial and is reflected in their enhanced social status in society. Tribal societies are known for their egalitarianism in contrast to the hierarchical nature of caste society. Egalitarianism and gender equality are valued in many parts of tribal India but much needs to be done in aspects of gender equality. In the tribes of India, it is usually seen that girls are not considered as a burden because of their economic value. Girls participate in all types of work at home and agricultural activities along with their mothers. In most cases girls and boys have their say in selection of the partners. From this discussion, it is clear that tribal women have comparatively more freedom and higher social status than their counterparts in the caste society. But there are areas where tribal women still face discrimination, for example in property inheritance, village level decision making and certain religious activities.

Tribal women play a very vital part in the local as well as household economy by participating along with men in all subsistence activities. It is the women, who with the assistance of children, are largely responsible for animal husbandry and collection of fuel, fodder and water. This permits them considerable time away from home and the village which makes them the explorers of the surrounding natural resources. Thus, women’s relationship with forest is very close in the context of the tribes. This also has made them strong and courageous in the handling of environmental challenges. The role of tribal women is not only of importance in economic activities, but her role in non-economic activities is equally important. Women’s role in childbirth, specific, rituals and festivals is an important part of village life. For all these activities forest plays a crucial role by providing various herbs, timbers, medicines and other forest produce. In many cases, tribal women act as the carriers of traditional knowledge on forest management and protection.

4.4 WOMEN’S VOICE AND STRUGGLE: A BACKGROUND

The previous section presented the role of women in tribal economy and their dependence on the local natural resources. In this section, let us understand how women are affected in the modern developmental process in tribal areas. In many cases, modern developmental projects and state interventions have negative impacts on the status of women in tribal India. Let us try and understand why and how women protested in British India.

Minor forest produce forms a major source of income in many tribal communities, especially those having less than five acres of land. Women and children are almost exclusively involved in collection of minor forest produce, its storage, processing and marketing (Singh, 1993; Burman, 1988). Increased government control of forests has disturbed the local ecology as
well as tribal economy adversely affecting the lives of tribal women. During the colonial period, minor and major forest products and grasslands were intensely used to generate capital or support colonial hunting expeditions (Albion, 1926; Whitcombe, 1972; Guha, 1989). Large tracts of mixed tropical broad-leaved forests in the Himalayas (producing mahua, mangoes, jackfruit, tamarind, bamboo and berries) were cleared and replaced by pure strands of more profitable softwood species (pine, teak and eucalyptus). The evergreen mixed vegetation of the Ghats was converted to single strands of teak and all over India, at different places and times, all forms of shifting cultivation and other subsistence activities were officially forbidden or controlled (Gadgil, 1983; Guha, 1985). Appointing of agents from outside for collecting forest produce had not only affected the livelihood of tribal women, but had also made their work more difficult. The result was ‘less income combined with less fuel wood’ available for them. Mining, industrialization, dams and other mega projects led to displacement of many tribes from their habitat. This led to exploitation and breakdown of the socio-cultural and economic support of tribal people.

Tribal women played a vital role in organizing the resistance movement against their exploitation. Protest originated to counteract any attempt by the outsiders or the state to alienate them from forest, land or any other natural resources they were dependent upon. They had actively participated in various uprisings and struggle against the British during the colonial period. Out of about forty major rebellions against the British from 1763 to 1856, tribals led many of them. The Kol rebellion, the Santhal uprisings, the revolt led by Birsa Munda and many others are known for the massive involvement of tribal women. Struggle against land alienation was the major form of struggle the women were involved with. In the pre-independent India, when the Britishers started to use the vast forest resources for commercial purpose, there were protests and uprisings by many tribes in which women played crucial role. As British interest in forests was exclusively for commercial timber, indigenous expertise of the tribal women became redundant and was replaced by a one-dimensional, masculinist science of forestry (Shiva, 1988). Since then, women’s role in forest economy and as the carrier of forest-related indigenous knowledge has been ignored. British policy on forest led the non-tribal groups, money lenders and commercial minded people to occupy most of the forest land previously possessed by the tribals. This led to active protest, leadership and participation of tribal women in struggle against such exploitation. The voice of tribal women reinforces the notion that the very existence of the tribes is linked with forest and many of the socio-economic activities of the women are directly related to forest and land.

In the Tebhaga movement in Bengal, there was wide participation of the Santhal women with full spirit and zeal. The Santhal Rebellion from 1855-
56, the Bhumkal Rebellion in Bastar and Birsa Munda’s Ulugulan movement in and around Ranchi are some examples. The role of women in these adivasi revolts was no less than that of men. They too faced the vicious repression unleashed by the British to crush these movements. These struggles, though, concerned with the immediate economic and existential questions of the tribes, were ultimately related to the policy and rule of the imperialist British. Innumerable adivasi men and women sacrificed their lives in this struggle against the British. The adivasi women have showed exemplary courage and determination to fight against the British and carved their names in the history of the anti-colonial struggle in India. Now, let us discuss the present picture of tribal women with respect to their relation, concern, voice and struggle with forest, land and other natural resources.

**Check Your Progress:**

Write a case study about tribal women’s participation in the struggle.

### 4.5 PROTEST BY WOMEN IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

In the post independent India the situation was not better and especially in the post-liberal phase of Indian economy, the plight of adivasi women became worse. The economic policies of the government, in keeping with liberalization, privatization and globalization, have opened the gates for companies and big corporate houses for investment purpose. As you have read many mega projects have been established in tribal areas which have led to the displacement of innumerable tribal people. Due to loopholes in the various state policies, deforestation and forest-land alienation continued unabatedly in independent India. There are numerous cases of forced uprooting of tribal population from their habitat due to establishment of large dams and projects. Old laws like the 1894 Land Acquisition Act with minor modification in 2006 is still serving the basis of land acquisition for public purpose. But this Act does not have anything to address gender issues
specifically related to displaced women. Enakshi Ganguly Thukral (1996) has pointed out that the Land Acquisition Act (1894) is gender biased and merely reinforces the existing situation of women’s lack of ownership of land and property. All Relief and Rehabilitation policies in the country go by the ‘ownership’ of land or property, while working out compensation, it reflects similar gender bias. Due to this situation adivasi women have raised their voice against the state, local contractors, and the corporate houses and are fighting even now against such forces. In this section we will discuss these issue in details.

4.5.1 Mining

In India, mining has been a focal industry in all the Five Year Plans. It is obvious that ‘the Indian state has been concerned with promoting corporate interests in tribal areas (Iyer, 2010). The mineral map and tribal map more or less overlap in India. Most minerals and mining operations are found in forest regions, which are also the habitat for adivasi or indigenous communities. Most mining operations are performed by public sector but since the 1990s it is the private sector which is leading. Apart from this, small legal and illegal mining is a rampant practice in India. Mining is always linked to a wide range of problems and conflicts. The problems of local communities displaced or affected by mining are manifold. As discussed earlier, the Land Acquisition Act of India gives over-riding powers to the state to encroach onto people’s lands for any ‘public purpose’ including mining. While the local communities are not consulted for take over of their lands for any projects, the women are the last to be informed and neither are their consent or objections ever taken into account. As discussed earlier, tribal men and women are deeply dependent upon their surrounding natural resources. Mining creates existential problems for both though women are more vulnerable. Given the dependence of tribal women on land and forest we can easily imagine the plight of women displaced and affected by mining. In India, people displaced by various projects is estimated to be 50 million. Of these, approximately 10 million have been displaced by mining projects alone. During 1951-95 more than 15 million hectares of land was acquired all over India. ‘As per government records, at least 75 per cent of those displaced are still not cared for or rehabilitated’ (Fernandes and Paranjpye, 1997, p. 6).

Whenever villages are displaced or affected, women are forced out of their land-based work and pushed into menial and marginalised forms of labour as maids and servants, construction labourers or into prostitution, which are highly unorganised and socially Marginalising. While traditional livelihood systems based on land gave them an important role in agriculture, collection of forest produce, management of livestock and related activities, the immediate offshoot of mining has been a total destruction of this role for women both from land-owning communities and agricultural labourers.
Women displaced by mining, have lost the rights to cultivate their traditional crops, and as forests are cut down for mining, they are unable to collect forest produce for consumption or for sale. Accelerated mining, as a byproduct of globalization and privatization has altered the nature of overall social, economic and gender relations in the tribal communities (Nathan, 2004; Mukhim, 2008).

Mining, in central, eastern and many other tribal belts of India, destroys forest, which has been the only source of medicine and health care for most adivasis. Modern medicine is usually available at distant places, far from the tribal area. Moreover, medical services and medicines have to be purchased and this is the reason why most tribal women want forest to survive. Exposure to mines is related to many health problems experienced by both tribal men and women who labour in these mines. A large part of the mine worker’s wages are spent on medical expenses and as a result, they are caught in a vicious web of indebtedness dragging the whole family into bonded labour. The situation of miners in Odisha and Rajasthan is a classic example of this condition.

Due to disappearance of forest, the cash flow that tribal and rural women had access to, by sale of forest produce and by breeding livestock, is dwindling. They have been forced to walk miles away from their villages leaving behind their children, either to collect forest produce or find wage labour and have had to sell away all their cattle. In many situations there is seasonal migration leading to work insecurity, breaking up of family relations and exposing them to various social hazards.

4.5.2 Displacement

Displaced women face an intensive economic insecurity compared to the men. Lyla Mehta and Bina Srinivasan (1999) have noted that in the context of rehabilitation, one of the most glaring instances of gender disparity has been the issue of compensation. Men are treated as heads of households and compensation, either cash or land, is invariably awarded to men. Women are not considered to be farmers or house owners. Single women and widowed women are particularly vulnerable in this situation. Similarly, Rehabilitation and Resettlement policy often gives land to major sons, but major daughters are excluded from such provisions. Thus, displacement induced development has a particularly adverse impact on women as they have no control over the cash compensation that is paid to the man of the family (Thangraj, 1996 quoted in Ekka and Asif, 2000).

Displacement leads to adjustment problems for women in a different way from those of men. When a family is displaced the women face adjustment problems in the new surroundings. Being cut off from an established socio-cultural support system, adaptation to new habitat for the tribal women
becomes a major hurdle. Climate and food habits change in the resettlement area and the displaced population is affected by the alien socio-cultural milieu. Due to loss of status, the migrant women are looked down upon and there is a perception of loss of status among the women also. This leads to suffering from stress due to alienation as well as other serious health problems.

4.5.3 Mines Workers

Tribal women, when displaced and forced to work as mines workers, face numerous problems including wage discrimination, sexual exploitation and various health hazards. Usually the displaced women are absorbed in small, private or unorganized mining sector where they have no work safety measures, are susceptible to serious health hazards and where there is no state mechanism to check sexual exploitation. The large-scale mines, which are shifting to technology dependence, have no scope for women’s participation as they are illiterate and lack technical skills. While the large-scale mining has no space for women, the small-scale sector absorbs them only as contract or bonded labour under highly exploitative working conditions. Wages are always less than those for men, they do not get a paid holiday during pregnancy or childbirth. The women suffer from several occupational illnesses including respiratory problems, silicosis, tuberculosis, leukemia, arthritis and reproductive problems. Whereas women could take their infants to the fields or to the forest earlier, women working in mines have to leave their children behind at homes, unattended. If they do manage to take the children, they have to expose them to high levels of dust and noise pollution, accidents due to blasting or falling into mine pits while playing, etc. These are some of the problems faced by women of socially marginalised communities who worked in the mines.

Check Your Progress:

List various socio-cultural and health problems which are faced by tribal women as mines workers.
4.6 WOMEN’S PROTEST AND STRUGGLE

Women look for long-term benefits unlike men, who are apt to be attracted by short-term benefits like getting cash for their land. Women generally have a long-term perspective (Hemadri, et al, 1999) and use this in the decision making during displacement and resettlement. This is the reason why women have stood strong against land alienation, mining and any other projects which ultimately threatens their existence as a community. Among the various protests and struggle organized by women against land alienation, Naxalbari struggle occupies a crucial place as you have already read. Women were at the forefront in their struggle against the exploiting landlords in the Naxalbari movement in West Bengal. In March 1967, poor and landless women came forward to join in large number in the struggle to recapture the land occupied by the landlords. Inspite of police trying to suppress the agitation, women kept the struggle alive by marking and occupying the fields. Seven women and two children were among the eleven persons killed in police firing in the struggle to snatch back the agricultural field from the landlords. Many women left their home and organized agricultural peasants for joining the struggle for reoccupying land from the landlords. In the same year another protest also out broke in the southern part of the country.

In Sreekakulam in north hilly districts of Andhra Pradesh women joined the men in large numbers to agitate against the money lenders and the landlords who had occupied their land by illegal and dishonest ways. On 31\textsuperscript{st} Oct 1967 some tribal women were marching ahead to join a \textit{girijan} conference when the landlords physically attacked and fired at them. Then the struggle took the armed form and there was fierce struggle between the tribals and the landlords. In the Srikakulam struggle, 13 tribal women sacrificed their lives in the repression by the state armed police (Singharoy, 2004).

Another famous movement which the rural and tribal women spearheaded is Chipko movement. Peasout women have primarily been acting to save their means of subsistence and their communities. In 1973 the first \textit{chipko} (meaning hug) took place when the village women hugged the trees and thus saved them by putting their bodies in the way of the contractors’ axes. This mode of resistance spread throughout the region and women organized and spearheaded the movement against destruction of forests. This was possible only due to the persistence, active participation and leadership of women from different social groups. Women’s commitment to save trees is the basis of the strength and power of the Chipko movement (Mellor, 1997; Shiva, 1988). As discussed earlier, tribal women are the carriers of indigenous knowledge related to forest conservation and sustainable use of forest produces. This knowledge as well as their dependence and attachment to forest are linked to the persistence and leadership of tribal women in pro-
forest resistance movement. Thus, the crucial contribution and commitment of tribal women to save forest and other natural resources is linked to various protest and struggle throughout India.

In Odisha, strong protest and resistance against National Test Range, Baliapal and BALCO Project, could make the Government to rethink about and finally to drop the idea of executing the projects (Reddy, 1993). Similarly, protest movements by the affected people in case of Rengali multipurpose dam project could compel the Government of Odisha to come up with an Rehabilitation and Resettlement policy for the displaced people due to irrigation projects in the State in 1977 (Pandey, 1998a). Women have taken lead roles in the major struggles against development projects like the struggle against Sardar Sarovar project, the struggle against Maheshwar dam, in Tehri etc.

People's resistance against the controversial Tehri dam project started in 1978 and continues even today. About 80,000 people from more than 125 villages have been affected by the project. Women and children have been at the forefront of the struggle and have often stopped work at the dam site. However, it has failed in breaking people's resolve. Gender is a major concern in Tehri since most of the displaced are women and children. Men migrate to the plains in search of livelihood leaving the women and children behind (Asif and Mander, 2002).

In recent years, widespread resistance movement has grown in the mineral rich states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha. In these states and in some parts of West Bengal and Maharashtra also tribal people including women are resisting land acquisition and displacement due to mining. In spite of facing eviction, displacement and sexual assault, the tribal women are not intimidated. In West Bengal, in the struggles at Singur and Nandigram, women spontaneously came out to fight. As was the tradition in Bengal, during the Tebhaga movement, women used traditional weapons, household implements and condiments like chili powder, signaling through conch shells in their ingenious methods of self defense. In these struggles, women became iconic symbols of resistance, even in cultural forms like poetry. In each of these protests and struggles we can see about half of the activists are women. In Lalgarh in West Bengal in spite of rapes, disappearances, murders, arrests and torture of women and men, protest marches of women sometimes numbering up to 50,000 are being held. In spite of strict laws like the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) tribal women continue to protest and struggle against land acquisition and other forms of exploitation.

In Bihar and Jharkhand, the Nari Mukti Sangh (NMS) is a strong and popular women's organization that gives space to women's voices and encourages their participation in economic, political and social activity and decision
making processes. Though media reports suspect NMS to be linked to Maoism, its members move from village to village, not only affecting women’s lives with their interventions, but also involving women and children along with them. Picketing at health centres where there are no doctors, at schools where teachers are absent, fighting for equitable distribution of food grains, for better wages and better remunerative prices, for equal wages for equal work between men and women, these tribal women’s organizations are democratizing the processes of women’s political, social and economic activities, thus making development and democracy more meaningful to them. These tribal women’s organizations are not only participating in anti-displacement struggles but they are also opening new horizons to the women in creating a politically and socially conscious environment in the remote parts of India. These movements act as trajectories towards social equality and liberation for women.

In the state of Odisha, the role of tribal women in environmental and social movements has been crucially significant. In 1998 women staged a struggle for water which consequently extended beyond agricultural concerns to addressing severe health threats. In Samaj Vikash Mahila Samity (SVMS), Odisha, federation leaders Chitri Dei and Usa Dei spearheaded the movement to address the lack of sufficient water. They moved from village to village, door to door, to mobilize the tribal women to demand from the government sufficient drinking water without excessive fluoride. The village women’s committees, with the cooperation of SVMS, organized rallies of hundreds of villagers. They brought their demonstrations before the local government officials to demand a permanent solution to their problems with water quality and quantity. After persisting for four years, the women achieved their aim in 2002, when the government provided a permanent solution by providing drinking water through a pipeline from the Sunder River, a seasonal river about 12 kilometers from the villages.

In Odisha, there is another important example of women leading protest and struggle against land alienation and exploitation. Women in Kashipur of Odisha are fighting against displacement and mining operations in their region. The local organization called Prakrutiko Sampada Surakhyya Parishad (PSSP) is spearheading the movement against establishment of a bauxite plant which is a joint venture of Alcan (Canada) and Indal (India). The struggle has been experiencing state repression and corporate abuse since 1992. Women have stood up to their cause and refused to relent to any pressure from the company. Even after a police firing where one tribal woman was killed and several others were injured, the women have not allowed the company to enter their villages. Mukta Jhodia, a tribal woman leader relentlessly struggled against the Hindalco-led Utkal Alumina bauxite mining and processing project in Kashipur, Odisha.
**Activity:**

Collect some case studies or stories from the newspaper on the lives of tribal women who work on industrial sites.

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### 4.7 LET US SUM UP

Tribal women today are amongst the poorest, most marginalized and backward people. In spite of their important contribution in various types of labour, the status of women is low. This has added to the grievances of the women against the state as well as various gender-discriminating practices in the society. This grievance against the state, the contractors, money-lenders, the corporate houses and the patriarchal oppression manifests itself in various ways among different tribal groups. Tribal women are deprived of educational and health facilities and the rate of literacy in this section is very low. Malnutrition, which is related to displacement, migration and mining labour, is not only rampant among adivasi children but also among women. In spite of the state’s welfare schemes and setting up of anganwadis, tribal children are dying in thousands due to malnutrition each year. Tribal women are also victims of sexual violence, abuse and trafficking. These are some of the causes which fuel the continuous dissatisfaction and agitation by tribal women.

The above has led to the fight against the landlords, money-lenders, the state machinery and the corporate houses. In Bihar, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Odisha and Maharashtra, the tribal women have successfully raised their voice and concern against exploitation and oppression. In Northeast India tribal women of Manipur and Nagaland are spearheading the movement. In the Narmada valley, Kashipur and Kalinganagar, they have participated in an anti-displacement movement and
Tribe agitated against the state machinery and the development projects. Tribal women have dared against all odds and successfully demonstrated against the oppression and exploitation on the national and international stage. In spite of arrests, beatings, torture and false cases by the police, the women have carried on fighting courageously.

4.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Tribal women are central to the economy of their society. Explain this on the basis of the discussion done in this unit.

2) There are distinct gender specific impacts of mining projects which are deliberately ignored. Explain the statement on the basis of this unit?

3) Displacement for tribal women is more than just losing house and land. Explain how displaced women often land up as landless and migrant women.

4) Show how displacement has direct impact on adivasi women’s constitutional and customary rights over their land.

5) Discuss three contemporary struggles in India spearheaded by tribal women with reference to the cause, leadership and success of the movement.

4.9 REFERENCES


### 4.10 SUGGESTED READINGS
