

Gender Integration in Poverty Alleviation and Resource Management A Perspective from Two Himachal Folk Songs

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Literature, as an expression of individual and collective experiences, aspirations, and dreams is the penumbra that surrounds any action, policy or programme aimed at recording or altering them. Since all literature is political, overtly or covertly, it provides the grounded vision for policies as well as a long-term evaluation of their implementation. The method of providing these two inputs is, however, different from the social sciences and is not entirely based on empirical data. But it is nevertheless, a faithful reflection of how far a policy or programme has made an impact on the lives of the people as also of what is expected by the polity.

Folk literature, in particular, depicts both the traditional knowledge and the percolation of the new into the consciousness and lives of the people. Also, folk literature, especially songs, is a powerful medium of change and record of that change because of its accessibility to the people. Folk songs, legends, tales and drama are the collective knowledge available at the grass root level, which is so essential to modify and fine tune macro programmes.

Gender can be viewed as a syncretic term not based on the polarity of the sexes but on complementarities. While the latter focuses on differences and is exclusionist, gender implies inclusion and similarities. In literature, the concept of gender celebrates life. It is the grand dance of *Prakriti* and *Purusha* whose rhythm creates and sustains life. From this perspective, gender is not just another differential or variable that is often stereotyped and which can be easily brushed aside with a casual footnote.

Further, for poverty alleviation and resource management, it has now been established that policies and programmes imposed from

without are not always feasible. Projects have to be developed that build on the local socio-cultural, religious, economic, political and literary knowledge. Therefore, even while planning right at the macro level, spaces have to be built-in for negotiation and local input. Thus, it is absolutely imperative to learn about local reality for a welfare project or one directed at sustainable development to be successful. Folk literature is an effective means of exploring that reality because it provides insights into the mindsets of the people and reflects their preconceptions, traditions, inspirations, and aspirations. Folk songs and folk-tales are the voice of the otherwise silent masses who have scarcely any say at the level of policy making or its implementation. In the absence of this voice, policies can quite often be inaccurate or even counter productive. For instance, according to a legend in a folk-song, a stray bitch begs for food from door to door and her misfortune is attributed to her previous birth when, in her life as a woman, she had the audacity to eat before her husband did. It is self-evident that in the area where this song is popular, gender sensitivity will have to be introduced more intensely before implementation of programmes aimed at women's welfare. However, a caveat must be made here that folk literatures are diverse and depict a whole gamut of experiences and emotions, therefore, they must be taken as a composite indicator of the mindset. It is important that they be dealt with as a whole and not be picked and chosen to suit one's agenda. Also, research of the deconstructed texts would reveal startling facts and biases otherwise hidden in the surface texts.

Resource management is about acting on the awareness of one's responsibility towards the use of natural and human-made resources, here too literature has a powerful function as a conscientising and sensitising medium. The power of slogans and mottoes is a case in point. It is well known how 'van hi jivan hai' had caught the imagination of the villagers, as had the rallying songs of the Chipko movement.

In Himachal, songs are sung at all significant occasions and, usually, women are the primary singers. So, in many areas of Himachal, as they go to the local *bauli* to fetch water for a sacred occasion they sing to the *Naga Devta*, or to the ancestors whose abode is in the water sources. This spirit of devotion ensures that the water source is maintained well. In the few areas, where the *Naga Devta* or *pitr* worship is absent, the water sources are meted out greater indifference.

This aspect of devotion to the natural resources can be harnessed

for long-lasting resource management in policy implementation—and women are central to it. In the Himalayas, as in most mountainous regions, women's role is crucial to the policies of poverty alleviation and resource management. The presence of women is conspicuous in the all round growth of Himachal. There are many indices to prove that Himachali women (as also of bordering areas of Uttaranchal) are more educated, contribute more to the labour force and economic production than women in the neighbouring states. They are also more willing to experiment and to shift to cash crops and horticulture. Yet, the latest census of Himachal shows a decline in the number of women per thousand men. This phenomenon warrants further research but at the elemental level a clear relationship between the religious and traditional views of the people and the preference for a male child is visible. Thus, apart from education, training, and economic viability, the historical, cultural, social and literary features of the hill region must be integrated for gender sensitive sustainable development.

Women are not only the collectors and consumers of energy and natural resources, they are also the nurturers and providers for the next generation. Thus, women cannot only be sensitised to resource management more convincingly but the results of the efforts will be longer lasting too. Water, fuel, home and hearth apart, women are the key to maintaining forest cover, purity of water sources and eco-friendly lifestyles. The scale at which women are ignorant or indifferent to these is the measure of the degradation of resources.

Thus, area specific songs about bringing water, collecting firewood, sowing, harvesting, and the like, give valuable insights into how resource management programmes can be knit-into the day-to-day life of the people. Often gender exploitation mirrors exploitation of natural resources. Ecofeminists rightly posit that the oppression of women and the domination of nature are fundamentally connected. Patriarchy posits a mindset where *Prakriti* and *nari* are both subservient to Shiva and *purusha*. It is worth underlining here, that the deification of women is as harmful to the integration of women in policies of poverty alleviation and resource management as is their marginalisation, because both attitudes place them outside the socio-economic and political reality.

Gender discrimination is part of history and heritage in almost all parts of the world, so also, in Himachal. In a popular Lahouli song 'Roopi Rani Deyi Bali' dating to late 17th century, the inability of even the queen of the Rana of Ghushal in saving herself from being

sacrificed is a close indicator of the socio-cultural position of women at that time. The song depicts a time of a fierce drought, when even the water sources have dried up. A *sadhu* from Chamba tells Raghurana to offer human sacrifice for water to return to his land. One by one, alternatives are suggested for who to sacrifice and are discounted: the ram cannot be sacrificed or who to sacrifice and are the flock; the black bitch cannot be sacrificed or who will look after the gate; the black cat cannot be sacrificed or who will keep watch at the gate in the kitchen; the prince cannot be sacrificed or who will inherit the kingdom; the princess cannot be sacrificed or who will the Rana marry her, as promised, to the ruler of Chamba. Only the queen, suckling her children, seems dispensable so she is tricked out of her palace by the court officer, Titu Maita, who pretends to take her to the spot where a new canal is being built. Instead, she is taken to a secluded place where the villagers sacrifice her. Before dying, the queen piteously sings that when they sacrifice her they should leave her breasts outside so that her children could drink milk and also to leave her head out for her daughter to come for grooming her. It is said that two milk-white streams flow at the place of her sacrifice and the coarse grass between them reminds onlookers of hair.

An analysis of this folk-song reveals that water-scarcity and droughts are not recent in the region and therefore any planning for combating desertification must be deeply researched in terms of geographical history. Also, the people blindly believed holy men and their diktats, thus, the more pragmatic approach of building a new canal and digging further is used only as a trick to bring the queen out of the palace. There is a suggestion of power play in the minister conspiring to sacrifice the influential queen. Thus, it is apparent that in times of crises, women are the most vulnerable—their social or economic standing are not cover enough. The stereotype which sees women as eternally sacrificing is upheld and so the mother is shown more concerned about the sustenance of her children than of her impending death. The queen's last desire expresses the yearning of a woman to bond with another woman, in this case, her daughter. Thus, even this rudimentary analysis facilitates seminal socio-cultural, psychological and historical insights. These inputs can make the difference between a water conservation programme being a non-starter or a success in the area.

Another popular Lahouli folk song 'Chepi ki Maut' describes the death of a woman in childbirth and how she leaves her children to the care of her husband's second wife, who in turn offers her water

to ease her pain. Health and family welfare programmes could be made comprehensive and perspicacious from the beliefs and events described in the song. For example, health programmes in this tribal area could focus on the reproductive health of women. It also appears that family oriented projects would be more productive than mere women based ones, in the implementation of which women-women and women-men could network for larger acceptance of the programmes. The complexity of interpersonal and community mores of the region preclude a ready-made project imported without this essential local dimension being integral to it.

Also, in most songs about women, the spirit of co-operation wins over rivalry and competition. The success of women's self-help groups, co-operatives and mahila mandals in Himachal is worth researching in terms of the texts and sub-texts being created along with their produce. It is often seen, especially in Kangra district, that members have their own small songs that they have made up while cleaning, drying and pickling their produce. Stories, confessions and confidences, advice and even gossip add to the canvas. It is proven that women are more articulate and open about their opinions and feelings. Thus, the above discourses taken together will, by and large, evince the major concerns and constraints of not only the women but of all people of the area.

It is important to underline that gender integration is not a matter of reservations and special programmes alone, though these are important too. But it is more about mainstream policies naturally accounting for both the genders. However, this should not be construed to mean assimilation or appropriation of the women's cause, rather it should ensure highlighting it within the larger framework. The Johannesburg Declaration took the Beijing Declaration a step ahead in this direction in its Principle 18, by resolving that the Summit is committed to ensure that women's empowerment and emancipation and gender equality are integrated in all the activities encompassed within Agenda 21, the Millennium Development Goals and the Plan of Implementation of the Summit.

In this blueprint for social justice, how women are perceived becomes the key factor, e.g., when drafting policies categories are made of farmers, labourers, workers, etc. and another one is made for women. This implies that women are not included in the conception of farmer, labourer, worker, even though there is data enough to prove that in hill areas, oftentimes, the woman farmer is more conspicuous and productive. In Himachal, many households

are women supported and their role in water and fuel resources management, production and preparation of foods and preservation of folk wisdom cannot be underestimated. It naturally follows that efforts be made to: make visible the unremunerated work of women; give special attention to the skills and needs of women in water and fuel management; secure equal access to all farmers, especially women and poor farmers, to productive resources, such as, water, land, propagating material, technology, and the results of applied research; promote knowledge of and research the role of women, especially rural and indigenous, in irrigation, watershed programmes and integrated sanitation schemes, focusing on their knowledge and experience. Proposals for gender integration in developmental activities do not recognise this fact so that they become skewered disproportionately with women getting only a fraction of interest in the stakes where they are slotted and are denied a fair share in the overall scheme. So, they win a small fraction of their special space but forego the larger portion where their presence is not factored in. It is imperative to stress that both aspects are important: women specific programmes and women being integral to larger programmes as well.

The very popular Kinnauri folk-song about *Banthin Gurkumpoti* (Negi, 2002, 53-61) challenges this blinkered viewpoint and presents a woman, as a hero, who fights for her own and her child's legal and social rights. Dated around 1870, the song is composed in the Humskad dialect and narrates the story of Gurkumpoti, a daughter of the Bisht family of the village Yavaringi. Her brother, Negi Gurdas, was the Sarhadi Wazir of the Bushahr royal court. Gurkumpoti loved Deva Ram of Chini but was abandoned by him in a pregnant state. Gurkumpoti gave birth to a boy in her brother's home. In time, she drew courage to go to the royal court and ask for the paternal rights of her son. Her passionate appeal so impressed the king that not only did he uphold her appeal but, at a later time, also asked for her hand in marriage. This song illustrates that: although Gurkumpoti is a single mother, yet she is not totally ostracised or victimised by society; she fights a legal battle against all odds, and wins her suit to prove the paternity of her child and ensure his inheritance; even as she lives in her brother's house, she works in the fields and is self-reliant. This song cogently shows the progressive slant of the people of Kinnaur janpad at the time and such a forward looking ethos is borne out by the astonishing development of this tribal area.

It appears, therefore, that in all state policies for poverty alleviation

and resource management, women should be targeted for empowerment and men for loosening their hold on resources and on power. However, this should be done in a complementary, sensitive way based on local reality. It is now well established that literacy and economic self-reliance, by themselves, do not guarantee women's empowerment. A notion of self-worth in women is also necessary because power comes from without but empowerment emanates from within as it consists of not only having power but also the consciousness of having power. Society can facilitate this self-appreciation by changing social attitudes and mores that deprecate women in everyday life. In this sphere, literature can be an indispensable tool for moulding the collective unconscious of society. Furthermore, integrity is the basis for integration and unless basic patriarchal structures of thought are shaken, dismantled or re-shaped, no amount of funds or projects can achieve social justice or responsible resource management. Literature has a small but seminal role to play in the process.

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