

CHANGING LANDSCAPE AND GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE NORTH EAST INDIA: A FRAMEWORK OF UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract

The gender dynamics includes everyday interaction between gender and the social structure embedded with the socio-cultural ideas and the hierarchies of power which defines the gender relationships. Likewise, the spatial dimensions of landscape influence the people, their culture, their history which in turn mould the gender cultural identity. The influence of landscape on gender dynamics could be found in various cultural narratives of the spatial landscape in writings, poems, folklores etc. Northeast India represents diverse ethnographies due to the diverse landscape. However, the term Northeast itself in this sense becomes contested due to its homogeneous connotation trying to put together the diverse communities, language, histories etc into one due to administrative convenience or to designate the region as 'other.' Despite differences among different regions, tribes, linguistic groups there have been certain uniformities amongst the North Easterner like common memories of insurgencies and counter insurgency problems, problem of illegal immigration, resource alienation, feeling of racial apartheid in the minds of the mainstream etc. which has helped the formation of a political identity as a North Easterner. The North Eastern States are dominated by diverse ethno-linguistic groups. Mostly the ethnic tribals of the region who are the natives are closely bonded with its ecological landscapes reflected in their cultural as well as in their existential condition of living. They are depended on their immediate nature for food, fishing, gathering fuel wood/ food and on the forest resources for building shelter.

Within this framework, this paper intends to see the diverse discourses on understanding the formation of gender identity, gendered sufferings impacted by the changing landscapes. How

changes in landscape impact gender identities differently intersecting with class, caste, tribes etc influencing their ontological understanding of self and others will be critically looked into. Further, how with developmental imposed changes in the landscape have infused the marketability of sufferings, sustainability and traditionality will also be an important part of this write up.

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Approaches to the Study of Gender and Landscape

Landscape studies is diverse covering the physical geography concerning the non-human entities like soil, landforms, air etc along with the human activities which formulate changes in the landscape, for example: patterns of land use, social ordering of land, economic patterns and so on. Further landscape studies also deal with the painterly description of landscape as beautiful, dark, and many more. American geographer, D W Meining (1979) in his article, “The Beholding Eye: Ten versions of the same Scene” analyses ten different version of defining a landscape. *Landscape as nature*, where the viewer in his mind is tempted to restore nature to her pristine condition, wanted to reclothe the hills with the primeval forest, clear off the settlements, heal the wounds and mend the natural fabric – to imagine what the area is really like by removing man from the imagination. *Nature as Habitat*, where landscape as a portion of the Earth is the home of Man and how man domesticated nature. In the way of domestication, men too adapt nature or landscape which reflects in diet and dress, emblems and rituals, in his everyday work and play. Third is *Landscape as artifact* where Meining argues that Man here becomes the creator and tame nature. For example, today weather is not important for man as he prefers to stay indoors in a controlled weather condition. Fourthly, Landscape is also viewed as *a system* which is related to scientific exploration of how the different natural systems work. Fifthly landscape is seen as *a problem*, dealing with issues like pollution, flood, congestion, slums etc. Landscape as wealth, reducing everything to wealth and extract wealth from the immediate landscape. *Landscape as an ideology*, where it is visualised as a symbol of the values, the governing ideas, the underlying philosophies of a culture. The other versions of defining landscape are *as Place*, *Landscape as history* and *landscape as aesthetics*. However, Meining has categorically concluded that there are exhaustive perspectives which one can add to defining a landscape. A gendered analysis of landscape was not highlighted in his ten versions of defining a landscape. How women conceptualize a landscape, where women are positioned in a landscape and how they have been accommodated to the landscape and how changes in the landscape have been differently faced by women has not been elaborately dealt with. Apart from these ten variants, studies on cultural landscape provides a wider area of study inclusive of the spatial or

geographical physical landscape and the myths, oral histories, stories of human civilisation.

However, in this paper, landscape has been understood in the context of meaningful socially constructed places involving human experiences, memories, history, sense of insider/other with special reference to women's experiences etc. Here acknowledgement is made that while talking about experiences, women/men doesn't belong to a homogenous category but are differentiated on diverse variants on the basis of class, race, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, location and many more. Despite the importance of the study of landscape and its impact on human civilisation, the gendered affects or how changes in landscape affects women have not been represented adequately. There are different feminist approaches which dealt with women's location in the landscape/home/space etc. The liberal feminist took the ardent task of documenting women's voices/experience/participation in history, geography and other disciplines which remained undocumented. History has been absent on land use pattern of women, allocation of resources, accounts of women travellers, ownership pattern, decision making process in resource management, which the liberal feminists wanted to document and demand rights and legal framework for the grievance redressal.

The Radical and Socialist feminists analyse the interaction and affects of Capitalism and Patriarchy both on women and landscape. They then to address the question why women face constraints in accessing their public space and how society focuses more on women's responsibility towards nurturing their children and as prime care giver in the families. They further identify that women's ability to bear children has positioned them closer to nature and landscape.

Eco feminists argued that women are closer to the nature than man due to the biological reproductive characteristics which made women the child bearer and nurturer. But on the other hand, man is regarded as having dominance over both nature and women universally creating dualism on the basis of body and mind. Sherry Orther (1974) in her essay, “Is female to male as Nature is to culture?” explains that women are universally considered as a secondary sex due to the perception that human culture which is “man-made” is superior to nature. As women's body is symbolically identifiable with nature, even after pro-creation, she is connected to her child caring and rearing whereas man being relatively free assigns much time in conquering nature and cultural creation. She assigns women's task to be the mediating

role where she transforms the animal like creature (baby) into cultural being through the process of socialization. However, her argument has been criticized as ethnocentric and generalized where both culture and nature are social constructs like man and women.

In another line of thought, Nancy Chodorow gives an alternative view distinguishing women and men on the basis of psychological understanding of self. According to her, man's sense of self is disconnected to 'other' and operates on the basis of an ethic of rights or justice whereas women's sense of self is interconnected and operates on the basis of an ethic of responsibilities or care. Thus, here disconnected self is the root cause of ecological crisis and all forms of oppression.

In a more contextual understanding of women's relationship with nature regarding to the Third World Women, thinkers like Gita Sen, Vandana Shiva tried to link the hierarchies operating between first world and third world, expert (man with western Science) and non-expert (women with traditional knowledge) etc. These hierarchies' robes women from their epistemology over their land, forest, water resources and replaces with the monoculture of dominance, capitalism and violence on landscape (Shiva 1993).

Carolyn Sachs on the other hand emphasized on women's standpoints rather than trying to focus on homogenized essentialized relationship between women and ecological landscape and tried to understand how the changing global economy affects rural women, land ownership, cropping system etc. She tried to understand how the rural women's connection to the nature has been changing due to the changes of global and national economic penetrations, commercialisation of agriculture, destruction of forests, shrinking of Common Property Resources impacting the livelihood condition of the rural women. She reviewed diverse theorisations of women's symbolic relationship with nature specifically land within the metaphor of earth as mother and nurturer, symbolic relationship of nature embodied with feminine principle of creativity, productivity, diversity and connectedness. She further relates the extraction of natural resources from rural areas for the needs of an increasingly urbanised population leading to a dichotomous relationship of commodification of labour of poor rural people as beneficiaries of the capitalist development, replacement of traditional cropping pattern with genetically engineered seeds etc (Sachs 2018).

The postmodern feminist discourses on understanding landscape have been more inclusive in the sense that they tried to understand gender and

landscape as socially and culturally constructed categories rather than "inherent", which ecofeminists argued. The postmodern feminist's analysis helps to accommodate the heterogeneity of gender and of landscape in understanding its interface with each other.

From the above discussion, it could be understood that, landscape change is the outcome of diverse forms of changes, like economic change, demographic change, changes in livelihood options, and technological change.

Nationalism and Gendered Landscape

As discussed earlier, landscape and its inhabitants are closely knitted and influence each other. Due to constant human activities, the landscape changes and on the other side, the interaction between landscape and its population leads to the formation of identity, imagination, culture and vision of the future order of the society, community and so on. Cultural representation of land is central to the nation building process or for the creation of imaginary of a nation. Colonial regime has always tried to attempt to write their history into the landscape. For ex: Fanon's analysis of segregated landscape symbolizing the colonizers spatial landscape with fortified or barricaded buildings, full of lighting, clean and in abundance with resources whereas the colonized spatial landscape expresses dark, gloomy and poverty ridden picture without modern amenities like electricity, schools and so on. Nationalisms are gendered and is intertwined with masculinity. The culture of nationalism can be seen to portray masculinity with using the terms honour, patriotism, cowardice, bravery, duty etc are intrinsically linked to nation and to manliness. The personification of national landscape and the conceptualization of nation are gendered if we see in the contexts of the linguistic expression used such as fertile land which is a symbolic signifier of nurturing wife/mother, warrior protector of the land as signifier of man as protector, the fatherland/motherland discourses on nationalism theory etc. According to Cynthia Enloe (2000), nationalist ideologies tend to stem "from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope." She argues how women are consigned to negligible, often symbolic, roles in nationalist movements and conflicts, as icons of nationhood/traditionality which needed to be protected and men as the real actor who are defending their freedom, their honour, their homeland and their women. Nira-Yuval Davis and Floya Anthias (1992), analysed women' question during the nation-building process as biological reproducers of the members of national collectivities, as reproducers of the boundaries of national groups (through restrictions on sexual or marital relations), as an

active transmitters and producers of the national culture, as symbolic signifiers of national difference and active participants in national struggle.

In the context of India, the nationalist discourse has passed through many phases from reformative, revivalist to transformative where the relegated position of women could be seen. During the whole discourse of Nationalism, women were inclusive only as reproducers of Aryan lineages, heroic mothers and wife and sometimes as celibate warriors only to return to the private sphere once India becomes free. Moreover, restrictions on women's education, imparting education only to make women a perfect wife and daughter, uplift norms of chastity, opposition to widow remarriage and raising the age of consent at the time of marriage etc were seen to be the issues which intersected gender question with the nationalist visions under the aegis of Revivalists. Further the debates on Brahmacharya to make a healthy and fit body, maintain healthy diet, sexual norms were given prominence to glorify the Aryan theory of race. In this whole discourse the question of the minority class or the Sudra community in general and their women in particular were being totally kept excluded. This was how women were positioned or located in the context of national imagination. This intertwining of masculinity and nationalism has been reflected in women's access to resources (economic, political, cultural) as a citizen in India.

Likewise in Assam and other states of northeast too, this masculinist nationalist sentiment was seen. Although the women of Assam had participated in both the Indian independence movement and in the Assam Movement in the post-Independence period, this was not out of concern for women's issues or a feminist agenda. In all movements for assertion of identities, women and their bodies were basically regarded as objects of honour and as performers of the traditions of the community. Women's common perspectives were thereby fragmented along ethnic intersections. The participation of women in subnational and ethnic assertions exposed them to public patriarchy, but the organizational capability of women as peacemakers or political actors remained under the banner of the political party. Nevertheless, participation in student unions and other organizations certainly boosted the women of Assam to defy certain patriarchal stereotypes.

However, women's location in a landscape of her nation depends on diverse power relations based on caste, class, region and many more. Within this context, Mahasweta Devi's Short Story -Douloti is Bountiful (Devi, 1995 and Yook, 2018) speaks about how changes in the ecological landscape have

put the family of Douloti into diverse hardships due to their location in caste landscape, gendered landscape and their spatial positioning. Douloti, the protagonist of the story is located in a spatial structure where, deforestation accelerated by the colonial expansionist projects and after independence, the national development projects based on the logic of economic growth led to the lending of ecological landscape of the rural and forest areas to the contractors, traders, miners, and migrant labourers. The Adivasis situated in these localities were seen as cheap labour resource and their landscape extractive economy for capital accumulation. Hereby the Adivasis forcefully accommodated into the capitalist structures as bonded labourers devaluing their tribal virtues, languages, and identities further dehumanizing them.

Douloti belongs to the Adivasi community who lived in a forest area and followed the customary rights in land, trees, forests as a clan-based land tenure system practiced by their community in a frictional village called Seora in Bihar. Douloti's community was once self-sufficient but with the coming of the colonial regime got displaced and dispossessed from their forest lands/ homes due to the large-scale deforestation done by the British Empire for transforming their so called "Waste Lands" into revenue Lands. Later on, after independence, the approach of the Government of India with the land conversion policies has robbed off Douloti's community rights over forest lands finally the irreparable loss of their indigeneity. Thus, Seora which was once a tribal dominated land with community-based property rights is now owned by a person named Munabar Singh Chandela, a Rajput, with the help of his son who happened to be a government officer. This shows how there has been a relationship between the land-owning class and the bureaucrats in India. Munabar with the help of cheap labour exploits the landscape to build fortunes. Ganori, Douloti's father, one such cheap labour falls under debt trap and ends up as a bonded labourer. When Chandela's Ox was killed by a tiger, he ordered Ganori working in his field during that time to pull the cart in place of the Ox. As his body was equated with animals, he was whipped by Chandela until he became crippled and worthless as a commodity (labour). This situation shows how ontologically these tribals were regarded as abject once and his debt was transferred to the shoulder of Douloti entrapping her in bonded prostitution. Paramananda Mazumdar, a human trafficker who owns a whore house in Madhupura, an urban landscape infused with commercial hubs. The nexus between two capitalist patriarchs was that, on one hand Chandela exploits the ecological landscape and the cheap labour to create bonded slaves, which were sold at a very cheap price to

Mazumdar to create another business out of women's flesh and blood to satisfy his customers' sexual appetites with virgin girls. Devi, in her story tried also to show the class-based differences between women, where Munabar Chandela's wife fails to understand the plight of women like Douloti and are infused as a profitable stake holder of the capitalist and classist society. On the other hand, the character Rampiyari, who was a debt-prostitute but later on relieved from the trap as one of her customer lover paid off her debt, herself enters the profession as a manager in Paramananda's whore house hereby excluded herself from the feeling of pain of Douloti and other likes when she received a upper hand as a manager.

Latia, Douloti's first customer devours her for three years until got bored after she was showcased before him in a beautiful sari with make-up. Later on, she was taken up by a contractor named Singh and she kept on selling her body mercilessly until her body became unconsumable but failed to come out of the trap. Douloti, Reoti and another sexual slave Somni had children from Latia, who became the beggars on the streets and later Somni after getting discarded from the whore house too joins then as a beggar. Their story of bonded slavery made the narrator compare the body of the slaves with the agricultural field where the boss Paramananda ploughs as they were reaping the fate of their parents working in the digging and cutting works and fell into the debt trap. There were other characters like Father Bomfuller, and two journalist who comes to meet Gonori to document the bonded labourers to change the exploitative system, through government legislation and enforcement. But the reports too were silenced inside a file.

At the end of the story Douloti's body tormented by venereal disease, dies walking to hospital, reclines down on the bare earth where a local schoolmaster had drawn the map of India in order to teach his students nationalism in preparation for Independence Day. The next morning the view of Douloti's body intersected by gender, class, caste, etc contradicts in the minds of the teacher and the school children questioning the issue of national identity in the postcolonial nation and the presence of the female subaltern provoking the contested understanding of citizenship and the universal concept of rights bounded by the national territory symbolized by the Map.

This friction of Mahasweta Devi, based on true facts shows how changes in landscape due to penetration of Capitalist induced development model, robs of the indigeneity of the locals, robs off their embodiment of self and how differently affects women with an intersection of race, region, patriarchy, and class and so on.

Assam and its Changing Landscape

As discussed in the introductory portion of the paper, the population of the Northeast and Assam consists of ethnic Tribes. These tribes were presented in the Indian society as located in a geographical isolated landscape, practicing simple technology with slow and simple conditions of living symbolised by a general backwardness to the practice of animism, tribal language, physical features, etc (Xaxa, 2008). The word 'Tribe' according to Xaxa is both a colonial construct as well as found to be documented in Sanskritic and Hindu texts. The colonial describes those people who were heterogeneous in physical and linguistic traits, demographic size, ecological conditions of living, regions inhabited, and levels of assimilation into a dominant culture as tribes for clubbing the heterogeneity into meaningful categories for both classificatory purposes and administrative convenience. Even in the Sanskritic and Hindu religious texts and traditions since the sixteenth century has referred those communities living under primitive and barbarous conditions as Tribes (Xaxa, 2008: 2-3). Thus, the tribes are identified as those who live in simple or primitive conditions, primarily dependent on nature for their survival and livelihood having a symbiotic relationship with nature (Xaxa, 2008: 102). Assam being the gateway of the Northeast has its own diversities in demographic landscape, spatial landscape, cultural and linguistic landscape and many more. The state consists of diverse ethnic communities mainly belonging to the tribes and non-caste based ethnic groups. As a result of the assimilation between the Mongolian and Aryan ethnicities, the region developed its own uniqueness. However, keeping in view the diversities and to integrate these communities into the modern democratic institution many measures starting political reservation for tribes under article 330 and 332 of the Indian constitution was made. Heterogeneity among the tribal community led to the development of the politics of exceptionalism or preferential considerations were made, for ex: the provision of sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution, establishment of autonomous district councils allowing them to manage their civil affairs according to their customary laws.

However, erosion of land and its resources occurred during the colonial regime due to the transformation of land forms to revenue land for which people were brought into colonial Assam specially the Muslim community were brought to work in the lands of the lower Assam, Adivasi people across different parts of colonial India were brought to work in the tea-estate which not only changed the ecological landscape but also the demographic composition of Assam. The landscape further changed due to the introduction of the line system in the tea estates which kept the tea tribes

aloof from mixing with the natives of colonial Assam. Thus, another line of political entrapment of communities were seen in the context of Bengali Muslims which led to the feeling of insecurity leading to the development of Assamese nationalism. Later on, with better communication facilities or as a spill out effect, the issue of illegal immigration has increased to a great extent, further threatening the landscape and its people.

Within this context, the affects of the changing landscape on gender have been left unresolved or unencountered. The eviction and forest land encroachment stories of Assam, the stories of natural disaster, rehabilitation, eviction of Laika Dodhiya, Assam, the experiences of Baghjan Oil Tragedy have shown clearly the class and gendered dimension of suffering. These women were suffering due to their location in the landscape as homeless, landless, penniless robbed off their memories with their landscape threatening their embodiment of self. Women due to the societal indoctrination are relegated to the private space and they tend to create new memories and narratives of belongingness, friendship, livelihood within the limits of their private sphere, i.e., within the societal web of the immediate neighbourhood. On the other hand, man is privileged to move beyond their localities to work outside in the public space. Thus, any change in the location or place due to eviction/displacement due to natural calamities or conflict leads to a loss of her identity. But the large-scale deforestation and land conversion for accelerating projects in the name of national development and economic growth has put immense effect on the women folk. There has been an increase in the cropland area with the introduction of “farm mechanization, electrification, and introduction of high yielding crop varieties” which have alienated the tribes from their forests, deprived of their rights and privileges within their original landscape.



Photo: Discovery Channel covering the Baghjan make-shift camp



Photo: Discovery Channel covering the Baghjan make-shift camp

Cultural-tourism, gender stereotypes and Marketability

Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her famous essay *Under the Western Eyes* has criticised the western/ mainstream feminists for stereotyping women in the third world as victimized, uneducated, domesticated, unknown about her own subjugation, retrained mobility due to family and tradition etc. Third world women were thought to be universally victimized and seen their emancipation in the hands of the Western mainstream feminist. Likewise, within the categories of women, the women of northeast are essentialized as backward, primitive, savage, traditional etc. The location of the native women of the Northeast has been marketized under the neo-liberal market economy in a very dichotomous way. For example: A women who in one hand is visualized as primitive is on the other hand becomes the symbol of cultural - tourism requiring to act in a pristine pure traditional or exotic way of backwardness.



Photo by: Dr. Phulmoni Das

The Karbi women crossing a small stream through a bamboo bridge with baskets of wood collected from the in the nearby forests depicts the identity and ethnographic location of the community. But with the penetration of neo-liberal market economy, eco-tourism has become another method of green grabbing opportunity linking up the ecological affairs to the capitalist market dynamics. Ecotourism under their promises “to promote environmental consciousness for consumers and also among the locals promising them to help in generating income as an alternative mode for livelihood indirectly make their way into the protected areas (Wieckardt et al 2020). For example: The depletion of the forest cover due to the expansion of Palm Oil cultivation northeast India (Arunachal Pradesh, Rabha-Hasong Autonomous Council, Karbi Anglong etc. to meet the goals of the Indian government under its National Mission on Edible Oils- Oil Palm (NMOE-OP) has led to more negative encounters with elephants in northeast India. The Palm Oil cultivation requires more water and inter-cropping couldn't be done due to the depletion of ground water due to the palm trees. These initiatives have further relegated the small farmers from their landholdings as well has an impact on the biodiversity of the region. Thus, the mono-cropping as technology intensive crops becomes gendered as palm oil cultivation was never known to the region.

The indigenous women have a very closely depended on forest produce for livelihood. Women vendors survive mostly by selling their local and forest produce. They sell fruits, flowers, leaves, tubers, roots, mushrooms; medicinal plants etc for survival and also collect firewood as a source of income. Any displacement from their landscape causes direct effect on their survival.



Indigenous Karbi women selling their local produce.

Photo By : Dr. Phulmoni Das



Photo By : Dr. Phulmoni Das

Women part-time construction workers after completion of the work goes for fishing in group depict the utility of leisure and subsistence livelihood strategy depending upon the river.

Women who were the harbinger of traditional knowledge and dependent on biodiversity are losing their identity and survival strategies. Further with the changing landscape, the culture and tradition would finally get alienated from the locals.

On the other hand, the transformation of Northeast Women with their mongoloid features being incorporated into the neo-liberal market facilitating jobs in spa-centers, as airhostess etc. This phenomenon shows how neo-liberal market has intruded into both images of women in the northeast as traditional and as a modern woman.

With these discussions to investigate diverse framework to situate gender in diverse landscape and its impact on her, her understanding of her own self as insider/outsider and so on the paper concluded that landscape studies historically have focused mainly on male responses, contribution and the landscapes occupied by them without understanding the location of women's stand point, women's relationship with nature and environment. In order to access a balanced impact of changing landscape on human, a more inclusive framework of understanding is needed to address the heterogenous narratives of entities cutting across gender, class, sexualities and so on.

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BEYOND THE BINARY INTERSECTING GENDER AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Dr. Priyanka Sharma

In recent years, there has been an increased emphasis on the convergence between gender and environment, particularly in the aftermath of the large-scale inequalities and injustices posited by the development process at various levels of the society, economy, polity as well as the environment. It has become increasingly clear that one of the grave challenges in front of humankind today are that of the 'triple planetary crisis' of climate change, nature loss and pollution affecting lives and livelihoods of different stakeholders. What becomes a reason of preponderance is that the gravity of such risks varies with the socio-economic, political and cultural situations in which a person or a community is situated. Although both men and women are affected by such risks and threats depending on the nature of their vulnerability and resilience, it has been widely accepted that women and children are at a greater risk of environmental degradation within the patriarchal system thereby increasing their vulnerabilities. Environmental issues are now reframed as issues of global justice and as such new alliances and associations are being sought to address such crisis in its entirety. This paper is an attempt to look into the linkages between gender and environmental justice and suggest measures for a more gendered response towards environmental justice.

Towards and understanding of environmental justice

Extending notions of justice and fairness to the environment is a recent phenomenon that emerged primarily with the global environmental negotiations starting from the 1970s and 1980s. Growing awareness on environmental degradation and realisation of the fact that the dominant discourse on development with a linear projection of economic growth induced progress is unsustainable as well as the disproportionate impacts of such progress amongst different communities led to global commitments for regulation of use of resources and their distribution. Over the course of time, new inter-disciplinary fields of study like environmental politics, environmental economics, international environmental law etc gained preeminence dealing almost with the same question - How to secure the environment and save