

## THE WHY AND HOW OF WOMEN-HEADED VAN PANCHAYATS

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### **Abstract:**

*Van Panchayats, a centuries old institution in Uttarakhand, have weathered many changes and challenges. A common thread in all cases where these organisations have been successful in conserving their forests has been the leadership and enthusiastic participation of women. This paper explores the reasons why women's participation may be crucial, and suggests methods to increase women's leadership in forest conservation.*

When I first spoke with Bhagoti Devi, I attempted to break the ice by telling her how warmly our mutual acquaintances spoke of her. She was nonchalant. 'Of course they will recommend you speak to me,' she said. "After all, it took a lot of hard work to have such a thick forest standing here." (Personal communication, September 2015)

Bhagoti Devi has reason to be proud. Under her leadership, the previously denuded 280 hectare forest in Parwada, Uttarakhand is now thriving once more. Not only are the various planted trees flourishing, but the women also practice a strict quota and rotation system when they harvest fodder and wood from the forest. In the seven years that Bhagoti Devi was the sarpanch of Parwada village's Van Panchayat, the forest has gone from being unable to meet one village's needs to supplying several neighbouring villages with fodder and leaf litter.

**Van Panchayats- History and functioning:** The Van Panchayat is an uniquely Uttarakhandi institution. Instituted in colonial times (Kumaon Panchayat Forest Rules 1931), these panchayats allow for a part of the forest to be governed by a democratic village-based institution. Lately, they have been subject to several changes in the laws governing them (Panchayati Forest Rules 1976, The Uttaranchal Panchayati Forest Rules 2001 and 2005); these changes are criticised for transferring increasing amounts of power away from the villages and to the state. (B.S. Negi, D.S. Chauhan and N.P. Todaria, 2012)

The Panchayats also face challenges in that while they are entrusted with much of the responsibility towards maintaining forests, they are not given sufficient authority to do so. For both punitive measures and fund management, they are dependent on the district authorities or the Forest Department.

The problems worsen with the change in governing laws. This was apparent during the late nineties when the State government was focusing on Joint Forest Management with the Panchayats and the Department. CHIRAG, an organisation in Nainital district of Uttarakhand had been entrusted with facilitating the creation of forest management plans for each Panchayat. Ganga Joshi of CHIRAG, has worked extensively with Van Panchayats beginning from the late nineties. This is In Joshi's experience, the microplanning was carried out in a very rushed manner. Where a competent NGO was not present as facilitator, the planning frequently took on a cookie-cutter approach with several villages having near-identical plans (Personal communication, September 2015).

Despite these challenges, Uttarakhand is home to several instances where Van Panchayats have successfully conserved their forests and also generated revenue from them. The lessons learnt from them can be successfully transferred to other village based conservation organisations. This paper deals with the lessons that can be learnt from some such cases.

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**Parwada Van Panchayat:** The Parwada forest in 2007 was denuded to the point where conflicts would arise over the sharing of fodder and grass. Extensive lopping for firewood and fodder without thought to conservation meant that the forest had very little chance to regenerate. Today, after nearly a decade of protection and conservation by the Van Panchayat, the forest is lush and healthy. This could not have been possible without the support of the women of the village who like elsewhere in the mountains are the primary collectors of forest produce. 'Women are aware of the need to conserve forest from childhood.' said Bhagoti Devi. 'From an early age they need to go and collect grass, leaves, and firewood from the forest. They know how difficult it is when the forest is poor. But without proper information, the women themselves become the destroyers of the forest. Desperate for resources, they do not listen when a ban on lopping is in place, or when fencing is done.' (Personal communication, September 2015)

With information, she says, this can change. It took her a little over a year before the women would listen to her. Now, nearly a decade later, they enthusiastically support conservation measures. They practice fencing and take it in turns to do 'chowkidari'.

“We had a lot of struggle to understand, but the younger women now know it from childhood. They will find it easier.” said Bhagoti Devi.

**Mansa Nala:** The Kosi watershed is the location for an exemplary story of one woman's determination to conserve her forest. In the nineties, when Almora district was drought stricken, Basanti Behen read about the connection between forest loss and declining river flows (Lokgariwar, 2011). She then took it upon herself to speak to the women, form groups and implement bans on indiscriminate tree felling. During their journey to revive the forest, the women had numerous encounters with the forest department, and illegal timber and rock miners. This gave birth to confidence in their strength and a belief in the value of non-violent protests.

In 2013, a cement plant was proposed in the valley of the Mansa, a tributary of the Kosi (Kunwar, 2013). This would mean the death of the painstakingly conserved forest, and also of the Mansa itself. The women of the four villages along the river decided that they would not allow it to happen. Several demonstrations later, the plant was relocated to another area (Lokgariwar, 2014).

Today, the forests of the Kosi valley continue to be protected by the women who assumed the responsibility of watching out for forest fires, preventing theft, and organising systematic harvesting of non-timber forest produce. The once barren slopes are now clad with rhododendron and oak, and leopards have begun to return to the area. (Basanti Behen, personal communication, 2014).

**Mahila Ban in Makku:** Makku Van Panchayat does not feature in a list of the success stories of this institution. The Makku Gram Sabha consists of eight villages that have the rights to manage their community forest (Bhatt, 2004). However, this forest is also used by 77 other villages. The Panchayat has an elaborate system of policing and taxation; despite this, illegal felling of timber continues to occur. Regeneration is also not happening, with very few saplings present. Joint Forest Management, when proposed, was rejected by the Makku Gram Sabha. Thus, while the Makku Van Panchayat has existed since 1956, it has low impact on the conservation of the forest.

In stark contrast to these are the Mahila Bans that are present in the area. In the 1980s, members of the Mahila Mangal Dal of Kail village were frustrated with the lack of access to forest products. They were encouraged by the Pradhan of the time to assume responsibility for the degraded civil land adjacent to their fields. With regular patrolling and protection, the forest regenerated itself to the point where women could collect fodder and fuel from this land rather than venturing into the Panchayat forest.

The success of the Mahila Mangal Dals over the Van Panchayat is due to several reasons. Firstly, as has been discussed earlier, the women have the greatest incentive for conserving their forests. A degraded forest means they need to labour significantly more to gather leaf litter, fodder and fuel than in the case of a dense forest. Secondly, in this case, the women had greater autonomy over the forest than the Van Panchayat did. Since the forest was on civil land, they were not answerable to the Forest Department and could make their own decisions regarding punitive measures and patrolling.

### **Increasing women's participation:**

The above stories indicate that community conservation of forest is successful when women's participation is ensured. Ganga Joshi explained, "It is mostly the women who harvest resources from the forests. They also visit the forests more and are more aware of changes in the forest. They are frequently aware that forests are denuded. If they are given options to conserve the forests, then they take it upon themselves to implement conservation measures"(Personal communication, September 2015). This is often challenging. In Uttarakhand, women have often formed the backbone of conservation programmes, but are marginalised when it comes to decision making or recognition (Drew, 2014).

Some steps can be taken to address this:

- **Raise awareness :** Motivation is key, according to Joshi. It is important that people understand that the forest belongs to them. They also need to be aware of their rights and the steps they can take to ensure them.
- **Sensitise development workers:** An inadvertent exclusion of women is possible even with the best-intentioned programmes. It is important that development workers be keenly aware of gender issues and keep equal participation of all genders in the forefront of their goals<sup>2</sup>. If government employees and NGO staff give women importance, this encourages the community to do so as well. It is critical to ensure that the men in the community give space for the women to express themselves. During the meeting, being aware of body language, making eye contact, and being patient will go a long way towards making a connection with both men and women.
- **Accept the struggle:** According to Bhagoti Devi, we should not be asking how to minimise the initial difficulty of getting participation from both men and women. Struggle is necessary to create change. There will be a struggle for the first year or two. But the next generations will have it easier.

## The eight-fold path to gender inclusion

1. Give equal importance to all voices
2. Manage current hierarchy
3. Maintain eye contact with all
4. Also include both men and women in all gestures
5. Draw women out by starting discussions with what is currently known
6. Do not smirk at any comment
7. Extend equal courtesy to each participant
8. Do not bully or pressurise anyone to speak

*Illustration 1: The eight-fold path to gender inclusion (Lokgariwar, 2014 (2))*

### Conclusion:

Women are the major actors in forest management in the Himalayas. In the present gendered distribution of rural household and agricultural tasks, women are responsible for the collection of grass, fodder leaves, leaf litter, firewood and water. All these are dependent on a healthy forest. While depleted forests lead the women to be in stiff competition for resources, they also have the greatest incentive to come together and conserve forests.

While women have been the chief supporters of people-led conservation movements, their leadership capabilities have not been acknowledged to the full extent. With access to proper information and motivation of both the villagers and development workers, it is possible to increase the number of women taking a lead in forest conservation. The results as shown are well worth the effort.

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