THE EMANCIPATED WOMEN - FOLK OF UTTARAKHAND

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THE EMANCIPATED WOMEN-FOLK OF UTTARAKHAND

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EDITOR'S NOTE

During the last few decades serious attempts have been made by activists of women's movements and organisations and *Mahila Mangal Dals* (women's self-governing welfare bodies at the grass- roots) in India to improve the status of women and to understand the multitude of problems and issues confronting them. These efforts have focused on the condition of women, their health and socio-economic status as well as their accessibility to positions of greater responsibility. These efforts are no doubt commendable. It is imperative that men and women enjoy equal status to ensure the smooth functioning of society. Though much remains to be done to improve the status of women, yet we cannot overlook what has already been achieved in this direction. If one side of the horizon is shrouded in darkness, there is a ray on the other side.

Inspired by women's movements in India as well as in other parts of the world, women have risen to the occasion to solve the problems confronting them and to improve their socio-economic status. Women in remote areas of India, struggling to survive in the face of great hardships, have blazed a trail with their display of active social leadership. If such efforts are properly researched and systematically compiled, they can provide a blueprint for action for women in other parts of the country There are innumerable such inspiring examples—be it conservation of natural resources or prohibition, education or protection of women's civil rights and privileges—in the country itself and we need not look for models from other countries. These women have achieved remarkable success and have become truly emancipated. The need of the hour is to highlight their achievements and to spread their message to women in all parts of the country.

Though such efforts are few and far between and are really a drop in the ocean, yet it must be remembered that each small

step contributes to the final goal. If these small but successful efforts are highlighted there is no doubt that other women will be inspired by them. Motivated by this line of thought, we have compiled this volume of women's success stories in various villages of Uttarakhand.

All the stories presented here document women's struggle, their indomitable courage, their enthusiasm, commitment and unity. It is hoped that these stories will provide the right direction to women's movements and *Mahila Mangal Dals* committed to the women's cause.

The stories included in this volume are based on real life events. Some of the women portrayed in these stories such as Gaura Devi, Tinchari Mai and Veer Vadhu are no longer amidst us. We dedicate this volume to these unsung heroines. We are grateful to Kuldeep Uniyal for his untiring efforts to contact women in various villages of Uttarakhand. We are also grateful to Brigadier Gyan Singh for invaluable information on the Bhagirathi Seven Sisters Club. Surendra Singh Kunwar, Manju Mamgai and Pushpa Negi provided valuable assistance in the publication of this volume, we appreciate their efforts. Last, but not least, we appreciate the support provided by *Uttara* Magazine, Kamal Joshi and Sunita Dhar whose ideas, experiences and writings helped us in the compilation of this volume.

Chhaya Kunwar

GAURA DEVI

Any discussion of the Chipko movement would be incomplete without a reference to the contribution made by Gaura Devi. In spite of being illiterate, she showed remarkable courage and enthusiasm in her attempt to mobilise women to protect their natural heritage. Uniting the women of Uttarakhand to offer resistance to the indiscriminate destruction of their forests, Gaura Devi blazed a trail and has become an international figure. She is held in high esteem by women activists all over the world.

Gaura Devi was born in 1925 in a tribal Marchha family of Laata village in Neeti Valley about 24 km from Joshimath in Chamoli district. Incidentally, Gaura Devi is also another name of the Goddess Nanda Devi. Since there were no schools in her village, Gaura Devi did not receive any formal education. Nevertheless, she was trained in the family's traditional wool trade. By the time she was 12 years of age, her mother began to worry about her marriage. In the hills, early marriage is an old tradition. Today, however, things have changed. In the past, young girls were married off by the time they were 10 or 12 years of age. In keeping with the convention, Gaura Devi was married to Meharban Singh of Reni Village. Her in-laws, Nain Singh and Heera Devi owned cattle, some land and also had a wool business. Gaura Devi began to assist her in-laws in their work. By the time she was 19 years old she gave birth to a son—a joyous occasion for the whole family including here parents-in- law. Unfortunately, she lost her husband when she was barely 22 years old with a 2 and a half old son in her arms.

Widows in Indian society have to cope with humiliation and hardships and Gaura Devi was no exception. She did not lose hope and continued to toil in the fields and even managed the family's wool trade by borrowing wool from the neighbours. After sometime, her in-laws also passed away and she was left

alone in the world with her son Chandra Singh. She raised her son single-handedly. Years passed and one day she told her son, "Son, you should now manage the fields and the wool trade. I will assist you". Her son took charge of the family business. By this time, the Tibetan market which had been an excellent source of local trade in the border regions of Uttarakhand closed down. This had an adverse impact on the family's wool business and Chandra Singh was forced to seek petty contracts. In the meantime, Gaura Devi immersed herself in social work around the area. She never hesitated to participate

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in the *panchayat*'s activities and other community endeavours. Underlying all her activities was a deep-seated realisation of the abject poverty of her fellow women and her own experiences. She firmly believed in action.

In the wake of the Chipko movement in 1972, the women of Reni decided to form a *Mahila Mangal Dal* in their village. They approached Gaura Devi and requested her to join the *Dal* as its President. She accepted their offer and promised to fulfill her duties and obligations to the best of her ability. Thus, the first *Mahila Mangal Dal* was established in Reni and its responsibilities included maintaining cleanliness in the village and protection of the community forests.

By 1973, the Chipko movement gained momentum and it soon spread to several villages including Mandal, Fata and Reni. Inspired by the Chipko movement, Gaura Devi mobilised the women of Reni and explained to them the significance of the forests. She said "Forests are our gods and we are alive

because of them. If there are no forests, there will be landslides and floods. Hence, we must protect our forests. We must not let anyone destroy them at any cost".

The women of Reni took a unanimous decision to save their forests. Gaura Devi campaigned in the surrounding areas to create awareness amongst the villagers of the significance of forests. Despite being illiterate, Gaura Devi argued cogently and made a deep impression on the villagers. She successfully mobilised the local people and made them aware of the need to protect their forests.

This idea was ingrained in them. They realised that they had to save the forests to ensure their own survival and for this they were ready to take any risks. They looked thoughtful and an unknown fear and conviction filled their hearts.

In 1974, the government authorised the entire forest belt of Reni to contractors for felling trees. Since Chipko had already spread to Reni, the people of Reni staged demonstrations of their forests. The felling of trees in the forest was scheduled for 25 March 1974 but the villagers were not aware of this. Ironically, on this day all the men of Reni had gone to Chamoli. On the morning of 26 March, a group of labourers from Joshimath along with the officials of the Forest Department set off for Reni in buses and jeeps and headed towards the *deodar* forests along the Rishi Ganga river. They were spotted by a young girl who had taken her cattle for grazing. She immediately rushed towards the village to inform Gaura Devi, "Some men with axes are heading towards the forest. They have probably come to cut down our forests." Hearing this, Gaura Devi called out to the women of Reni including Leelamati, Uma Devi, Gomati Devi, Gauma Devi, Moosi Devi, Parsa Devi, Harki Devi, Bali Devi, Khasa Devi and Tilari Devi. There were

around 27 women present and Gaura Devi said to them, "Today is our test. There are no men in the village. We must save our forests. Be prepared to fight". All the women marched off towards the forests.

This was a serious challenge facing these simple women of the hills. These women not only understood the significance of forests but also realised that the destruction of their forests meant a threat to their very survival. Forests are the lifeline of the hills. This idea was ingrained in them. They realised that they had to save the forests to ensure their own survival and for this they were ready to take any risks. They looked thoughtful and an unknown fear and conviction filled their hearts.

On their way to the forests, the women came across some labourers carrying food supplies. Gaura Devi requested them: "You men should go back. We have come to protect our forests". Uma Devi added, "We will give up our lives but we will not let any one destroy our forests." The labourers replied, "We are cooking food for ourselves in the forest therefore we must go back." The women told them to leave their supplies behind, and 6-7 women sat there keeping a watch on their supplies, lest some other labourers turned up, around 3 km away in the forest. The officials of the forest department along with the contractor were relaxing in a cave. Not very far from them, some labourers were sharpening their axes. Soon the women reached there. They were brimming over with determination and enthusiasm. Not for a moment did they stop to think that they were women and would not be able to do anything. Driven by their indomitable willpower and unity,

With this spectacular victory, Gaura Devi taught an important lesson to women in all the villages — they are neither alone nor are they weak.

these women emerged victorious much to everyone's amazement.

Gaura Devi addressed the labourers, "After eating your food, please leave the forest." As the food was still being cooked, the men of the Forest Department began to argue. Some of them were drunk and they began to hurl obscenities at the women. But the women were firm in their resolve. Ignoring all the obscenities being hurled at them, they continued to oppose the men and asked them to leave the forest. There were around 60 officials and labourers present in the forest. The officials of the Forest Department ordered the labourers to commence their work. They said, "Begin your work immediately. Do not listen to these women. They are powerless to do anything. Do not let them intimidate you". By now the women were seething with anger, they shouted, "These trees are our sages. These forests are our parental home. We will not let you destroy them. If you cut down these forests not only will you destroy our fields and houses but also the plains of Haridwar will be devastated by landslides and floods".

The labourers looked inquiringly at the contractor. The women repeatedly requested them to leave the forest. Harki Devi addressed the labourers: "Even you have children. Save these forests for the sake of your children. If you clear the forests on the top of the hills then it will not be possible for us to live here any longer". Another woman said, "Every year we collect mushrooms,*chandra,* mangoes, almonds and walnuts from the forests. These forests are our parental home. Our goods also dwell here. If you insist upon cutting them we will be forced to cling to them".

The contractor and the officials of the Forest Department began to threaten the women with dire consequences such as having them arrested for obstructing government work. One of

them even brandished a gun at them. But the women showed no signs of fear. Gaura Devi shouted, "Come on, shoot us and then destroy our natal home. Before you touch our trees you will have to kill us. If you have courage then kill us."

All the women stood together and assumed the form of the fierce goddess Durga. Seeing their ferocity, the labourers ran helter-skelter. Even those labourers who were carrying food supplies were asked to retreat. Eventually, they all left the forest. The firm rescue of these women had compelled them to retreat.

The women followed the retreating group of men for nearly 2 km. They then decided to destroy the concrete bridge that led to the forest. The whole night they kept vigil over the group of men.

Meanwhile, the men of Reni who had gone to Chamoli that fateful day also heard the news about labourers entering their forests. They were worried and convinced that their forests would have been destroyed. Not once did it occur to them their women who had been waging a struggle to survive in the hills would eventually defend the forests of Reni. The remarkable victory of the women of Reni led by Gaura Devi had an impact on the women of other villages and all of them were inspired to protect their forests.

The following day the leaders of the Chipko movement—Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Hyatt Singh and Govind Singh—visited Reni. Women from other villages also marched to Reni. The entire district was rejoicing over their victory. Processions were organised in Reni under the leadership of Gaura Devi—the heroine of Reni.

Gaura Devi narrated the entire drama that had taken place the previous day to Chandi Prasad Bhatt and said, "Please do not tell anyone how the officials of the Forest Department

misbehaved because they may lose their jobs. The important issue is that our forests have been saved. We will continue to protect our forests. We will not allow anyone to destroy them. We will not let our land be devastated by floods and landslides"

Gaura Devi was filled with compassion for those who had misbehaved with her. Filled with admiration for her exemplary behaviour, one of the officials of the Forest Department apologized to Gaura Devi and requested her to refrain from mentioning the gun-toting incident to anyone.

Gaura Devi's rare decision-making ability not only saved the forests of Reni but also made Reni famous in the world. Gaura Devi became the symbol of Chipko, epitomizing women's participation in environmental movements. With this spectacular victory, Gaura Devi taught an important lesson to women in all the villages—they are neither alone nor are they weak. With determination and self-confidence they can cross all hurdles and solve any problem, be it protecting the forests or providing social security to women.

Gaura Devi's activities were not confined to Reni alone. In 1974, the historic temple of Badrinath faced a threat from the Birlas (a large industrial house in India). In an attempt to save this ancient heritage, Gaura Devi mobilised the women of several villages of Uttarakhand and said to them, "The Badrinath temple is the heritage of Garhwal and it is the source of our culture and tradition. We will not tolerate any external interference by the Birlas. Any such attempt will destroy our priceless cultural heritage". All the women concurred with Gaura Devi. Accompanied by a strong group of 40 women from the neighboring villages, Gaura Devi reached Badrinath. Following the massive procession of the "Save Badrinath Temple campaign", Gaura Devi presided over the historic meeting that was held in Badrinath.

During 1990-91, several programmes were organised at the block level and the members of the *Mahila Mangal Dal* in Reni received training in various fields including preparation of soybean, sweetmeats, potato chips, preservation of fruits, etc. However, this training did not benefit them as they lacked practical knowledge of marketing and business. Unfortunately, they did not receive any assistance from the block office or any other agency in this area. Furthermore, they were not educated enough to understand the mechanisms and dynamics of the market.

Working tirelessly to protect the forests and creating awareness among men, women and children, Gaura Devi suffered from kidney problems at the fag end of her life. She also suffered a paralytic attack. Despite all attempts to save her, Gaura Devi breathed her last on 4 July 1991.

Gaura Devi continues to live inside each and every women of Reni. Credit must be given to her for spreading the Chipko movement all over the region and internationalizing it. Raising slogans like 'Save the forests, save the nation', Gaura Devi and the other women proved to the world that if women unite and use their collective strength they can achieve anything.

TINCHARI MAI

Driven by familial and societal pressures, many women in Uttarakhand often renounce the world and become *sannyasins*(ascetics). Such women are highly respected in society. Tinchari Mai was a *sannyasin* with a difference. Inspite of renouncing the world she did not forsake her social responsibilities. She incessantly fought against social evils and malpractices prevalent in society while fulfilling her spiritual obligations.

Tinchari Mai or Deepa (as she was known at birth) was born 80 years ago to Ramdate Nautiyal and Ropa Devi of Majyur village in Thailsain block. Her entire life is a saga of courage and struggle against the exploitation, humiliation and tragedy of hill women.

Deepa was barely 2 years old when her mother died. By the time she was 5 years of age her father also passed away leaving her all alone in the world. A distant uncle in the village took pity on her and raised her.

Deepa was a very naughty and mischievous child. Due to lack of educational facilities in her village young Deepa was deprived of education. This lack of education tormented her throughout her life. By the time she was 7 years of age she was married to Ganesh Ram of Gravani village who was 17 years her senior. Too young to understand the meaning of matrimony, Deepa was very happy on her weeding day. Dressed in fine clothes, jewelry and garlands around her neck, her happiness knew no bounds. The sound of the drumbeats and the notes of the pipes fascinated her. Surveying her bridal finery again and again she danced with joy. She would tell her young friends, "See, I am wearing such beautiful clothes today. Sattoo look at these fine jewels. I am really enjoying all this".

Oblivious of her surroundings, she enjoyed the lavish wedding feast. When the groom and his party arrived in the village, she rushed out with the other girls to see the marriage party. When it was time to leave she ran and sat inside the palanquin and did not weep. Seeing this, someone remarked tauntingly, "What a stubborn and shameless girl".

The whole night Deepa slept clinging to her sister-in-law and the next morning she left for Rawalpindi with her husband. She was very eager to go to Rawalpindi because she wanted to see the big city. Her husband was a *Hawaldar* in the army. Every morning before leaving for work he would bathe, dress

Hundreds of young boys and girls are forced into marriage. Victims of this evil social practice, the future of these young children is entrusted to God.

and feed his young bride. Deepa would spend the whole day playing with other girls in the neighbourhood. Being many years senior to her, he would never check her for her childish pranks. Instead, he would treat her like a child. When she would refuse to bathe, he would coax her, "Look Deepa if you bathe you will become fair complexioned. If I go to war and die on the battlefield then anyone will be eager to take a fair bride". And Deepa would readily agree to bathe. Days passed by in this playful activity.

Child marriage is an ancient tradition in India. Today, however, with the spread of education and science, this practice is confined only just to a few parts of the country, particularly Rajasthan. In the past, girls were married when they were still very young. Instead of playing and attending school, the responsibility of a household was thrust upon them. The age difference between the bride and the groom would often be as much as 10 to 20 years. It is a wonder that parents would readily agree to such

matches. On the day of *akka teej*, hundreds of young boys and girls are forced into marriage. Victims of this evil social practice, the future of these young children is entrusted to God.

When Deepa was 19 years old, her husband was killed in battle. Deepa was inconsolable and she remained in Rawalpindi for a week. A British officer would inquire after her morning and evening. One day the officer in charge of the division called Deepa to his office and explained to her in great detail the amount of money due to her husband. He handed over the money to the British officer who was to escort her to Lansdowne. Deepa spent the entire night thinking about her future. There was no one in her natal home and none of her in- laws would be willing to support a "widow". She decided that she would not be a burden on any one and would find a way to support herself. This firm resolve to fend for herself revealed her rare courage. The next morning she collected all her husband's belongings and left for Lansdowne escorted by the British officer.

Unfortunately, the people who ill treat widows often tend to forget that these unfortunate women are not to be blamed for their plight. They are merely victims of their fate. They are members of society and have a right to lead a life of dignity like everyone else.

After reaching Lansdowne, her escort took her to a senior officer's house and handed over the money to him. The officer deposited the entire amount in Deepa's name in the local post office. Three or four days later he summoned the *pradhan* (head) of Ganvani village and instructed him to escort Deepa to the house of her in-laws.

No one welcomed Deepa when she reached her in-laws' house. In fact, they began to ill-treat her. Widows in Indian society have always been ill-treated. They are held in contempt

and are not allowed to participate in weddings or ceremonies because their very presence is considered to be a bad omen. Unfortunately, the people who ill treat widows often tend to forget that these unfortunate women are not to be blamed for their plight. They are merely victims of their fate. They are members of society and have a right to lead a life of dignity like everyone else. With the spread of education, attitudes toward widows are changing in the big cities, in the remote villages, however, their condition continues to be appalling because there is no one who can understand their sorrow.

One day Deepa left her in-laws' house and went to Lahore She sought refuge in a temple where she met a *sannyasin*. The *sannyasin* initiated Deepa into her fold and gave her the name of Ichhagiri Mai. Severing all ties with this world and forgetting the sorrows of her past life, Ichhagiri Mai began life anew.

In 1947, Ichagiri Mai went to Haridwar and stayed at Chandi Ghat for a period of 9 months. Seeing the misdeeds of sham ascetics and monks, she became sad. The whole day these men would smoke opium and hashish and drink alcohol. Ichhagiri Mai decided to expose their wicked deeds. This marked the beginning of her real struggle against social evils. When she began to expose these men they were taken aback. Even though she was one against many she continued to oppose them.

Mai began to travel and finally reached Sigaddi Bhabar in Kotdwar. She built a thatched hut for herself. As time passed by she began to realise that there was an acute scarcity of water in Sigaddi village. The local women had to carry water over long distances. Moved by their plight, *Mai* decided to contact the officials of the concerned department. She met the Deputy Collector and requested him to make the necessary arrangements to supply water to Sigaddi. However, her words fell upon deaf ears. Not one to give up easily, *Mai* traveled to

Delhi and sat in protest outside Prime Minister Nehru's house. When Nehru came out to go to office she stood in front of his car. The policemen on duty tried to drag her out of the way but she refused to budge. Pandit Nehru then alighted from his car and heard her account of the hardships faced by the women of Sigaddi. *Mai*'s body was burning with fever, Pandit Nehru caught hold of her hand and decided to send her to a hospital. But *Mai* resisted and said *"Baba*, first promise me that water will be supplied to the village". Nehru reassured her that immediate action would be taken and sent her to a hospital. When *Mai* was leaving he gave her some clothes and within a few days Sigaddi had a regular water supply. What the villagers had been struggling to achieve but had failed, *Mai* achieved single-handedly. She devoted her entire life to the service of the people and never hesitated to do her duty.

From Sigaddi, *Mai* went to Motadhak. A local teacher named Mohan Singh gave her shelter and looked after her as she had grown old by now. There was no school in Motadhak village and Mohan Singh was keen to set up a school in the village where the local children could study. Even though *Mai* was illiterate yet she understood the significance of education. She told Mohan Singh, "Master *baba*, I am illiterate but I do not want to see any child being deprived of education in this village. The village will definitely have its own school".

Mai had some money of her own and she also raised funds by collecting donations. She used the money to buy bricks, steel, cement, etc. and within 3-4 months the school building was ready. *Mai* had a stone laid in memory of her late husband whom she loved and respected highly. The school began to function and the local children enrolled there. Today, this school has become an intermediate college. *Mai* always regretted the fact that she had not received any education.

Throughout her life she experienced this deprivation and for this very reason she attached a great importance to education.

After completing her work in Motadhak, *Mai* moved on to Badrinath Dham. The *rawal* of the temple made arrangements for her stay. From Badrinath *Mai* went to Kedarnath where she lived in the temple for 4 years. She then went to Pauri and stayed with the conservator of forests, Chain Singh, for 2 years. Chain Singh held *Mai* in high esteem.

She desired nothing for herself and worked selflessly to fulfill her social obligations and responsibilities.

One day, as she was relaxing on the porch of the local post office she saw a man step out of the *tinchari* shop across the street. He was drunk and he began to dance wildly. He began to hurl obscenities at a group of women passing by on their way to the forest to collect fuelwood and fodder. Then he passed out and fell into the drain. This incident infuriated *Mai* and she immediately rushed to the Deputy Commissioner's house. She found him sitting in the porch busy writing something. When Deputy Commissioner Bagchi saw *Mai*, he offered her a seat. But *Mai* was seething with anger. Grabbing him by his hand she said "You are sitting here. Come with me and see for yourself what is happening under your administration"

Seeing *Mai*'s face flushed with anger, the Deputy Commissioner was taken aback. He called for a jeep and drove down with *Mai* to the spot where the man was lying unconscious. *Mai* said to him angrily, "Now, see for yourself what is happening right under your nose. You will not do anything. But I will not let this happen again. I will set this shop on fire even if you imprison me. I will give up my life but I will not let anyone sell *tinchari*. Without a word, the Deputy Commissioner drove away.

Mai got some kerosene and matches and stood in front of the shop. The door of the shop was bolted from the inside. *Mai* banged on the door but it did not open. She then picked up a huge stone and hurled it at the door. The door broke down . She saw some men drinking inside the shop. Realising that the door had broken down, these men ran helter-skelter. *Mai* could no longer control her anger and she stepped forward to burn down the shop. No one in the crowd had the courage to stop her. At that time *Mai* had assumed the fierce form of the goddess Kali. She sprinkled kerosene all over and then lit a match, soon the shop was ablaze and within a few moments it was all over.

Mai heaved a sign of relief and marched off to the Deputy Commissioner's house. She informed him, "I have burnt down the shop. If you want to imprison me then do so." Bagchi detained *Mai* at his residence the whole day and in the evening he drove her down to Lansdowne.

Mai did not regret what she had done; in fact she was happy that she had taken this step. Because of this act of courage, Ichhagiri Mai came to be know as Tinchari Mai. Continuing her struggle against alcohol, *Mai* inspired other women of the village to agitate against this social evil.

In the wake of this incident, *Mai* went from village to village urging women to wage a war against alcoholism. In one village, she came across a man who would drink and then beat his wife and children mercilessly. *Mai* decided to stay on in that village. She urged the man's wife not to serve him any food. After all, how long can a man survive without food and water? Eventually the man realised his mistake and promised never to drink again.

Mai encouraged the women of Chamoli to take up productive activities like sewing and embroidery to improve

their standard of living. In addition to this, she urged them to become educated.

Waging a tireless battle against the evils and ills of society, *Mai* breathed her last on 19 June 1992. Today she is well known in the region as Tinchari Mai. Despite her lack of education she was fearless. She successfully drew the attention of leaders and officials to the problems of the people and struggled relentlessly to solve their problems. She desired nothing for herself and worked selflessly to fulfill her social obligations and responsibilities. Her battle against liquor was a great blow to the liquor barons. Even today she is remembered with great respect and admiration in the villages of Uttarakhand.

WOMEN OF BACHHER EXPLAIN DEVELOPMENT

The Chipko movement launched during the decade of the seventies has entered its twentieth year. Initially launched to protect and present the forest and natural wealth of the Himalayan region, this movement continues in one form or the other. The remarkable success of this movement is largely due to the collective strength of the *Mahila Mangal Dals*. Even today these *Dals* are involved in an ongoing struggle to preserve their forest and natural wealth.

Situated in the lap of the Himalayas about 20-25 Km from Gopeshwar—the seat of Chamoli district headquarters—is a village called Bachher. The lush green trees surrounding the village reveal the natural wealth of the village. Behind this breathtaking beauty of Bachher lies a long saga of women's struggle. Even though these women had to face many hardships in the course of their struggle, yet with undaunting courage and enthusiasm they continued with it. And the transformed scenario in Bachher is the result of their sustained struggle. There is a strong *Mahila Mangal Dal* in the village which provides support to women in other villages and encourages them to become aware of their environment. According to the President of the *Mahila Mangal Dal*, Kalawati Devi, 15-16 years ago there was no such organisation in the village. Around that time the Chipko movement, started in Chamoli, was at its height. The Chipko movement's call to save the forests had also reached Bachher. Leaders of the Chipko movement had encouraged women to form their own organisation. An enlightened woman, Kalawati Devi, saw women in other villages support the movement, and she decided to mobilise the women in her village to form their own organisation. She went from house to house urging women to write. A meeting was called but only a few women attended it. Kalawati Devi addressed the women present, "Sisters, our village has many problems. We do not have electricity, we find it difficult to

collect firewood and fodder for our cattle. Our forests are being rapidly destroyed. It is time that we women got together to save the situation. We must save our forests."

When the women heard Kalawati Devi's speech they realised the extent of the problems. Kalawati Devi continued to appraise them of the multitude of problems facing them and encouraged them to fight against these. Gradually, the women became aware of their environment and natural wealth and expressed a strong desire to save their wealth.

Some of them even had to neglect their household chores and their work in the fields to participate in the agitation; others were accused of inciting women. They were humiliated at every step but they never lost hope and continued to fight till they accomplished their goal.

The Dasholi Gram Swaraj Mandal in Chamoli had been engaged in the protection of the environment and social welfare activities for a long time. All the villages in the region were impressed by the activities of the Dasholi Gram Swaraj Mandal. Following the Chipko movement, the Dasholi Gram Swaraj Mandal had developed a relationship with the women of the region. Hence, the women of Bachher decided to seek assistance from the *Mandal*. Since the Dasholi Mandal was already engaged in raising consciousness among women, they listened patiently to the women and suggested that these women launch a movement against their problems.

The women of Bachher then decided to launch a movement to protest against the lack of electricity in their village. In spite of the fact that the villagers had completed all the formalities and had deposited the required fee, the electricity department had not taken any action to supply electricity to the village. The women staged a *dharna* outside the department and pressurised

the officials to look into the matter. As a result of their sustained effort, the village soon received electricity. These women had proved their collective strength by winning their first victory.

For a long time the men of Bachher had been trying in vain to get electricity for their village. Through their collective effort, the women of Bachher succeeded where their men had failed. But it was not an easy victory as they had to struggle in the face of several odds. Family members would taunt and criticise them when they went out to attend meetings. Some of them even had to neglect their household chores and their work in the fields to participate in the agitation; others were accused of inciting women. They were humiliated at every step but they never lost hope and continued to fight till they accomplished their goal. This victory boosted their self-confidence and morale, and renewed their faith in their decision-making ability. A procession was taken out in Bachher to celebrate their victory. Some of the men who were earlier critical of them began to praise them and applaud their success.

Driven by the desire to work collectively, the women decided to form a *Mahila Mangal Dal* in the village. They approached Kalawati Devi and said, "You began all this, we want you to be the President of the *Dal* and create awareness among women". As soon as the *Dal* was formed, other women in the village also sought membership, even though it meant opposing their families. Eventually the men of the village relented and allowed their women to join the *Dal*.

The women of Bachher were concerned about their dwindling forests because they know that once the forests were destroyed they would be the worst sufferers. The *sarpanch* (head) of the community forest was a corrupt man who would encourage outsiders and poachers to fell trees in the forest. As a result, the women of Bachher had to walk long distances in

search of fuelwood and fodder. One day the *sarpanch* sold off a large tract of the forest to outside contractors who lost no time in felling the trees. When the women heard of this, they called a meeting of all the women in the village. They unanimously decided: Today, we will not spare these contractors and the *sarpanch*, they have no right to destroy our forests. We will not let them destroy our forests.

They marched towards the forest and seized a truck loaded with timber. The contractor began to threaten the women with dire consequences. But the women remained unmoved and retorted, "How dare you fell trees in our forests? These forests belong to us and we will not allow you to take a single log of wood from here".

Later Kalawati Devi recalled, "The whole night none of us slept. We sat on the road keeping vigil on the truck. We were afraid that the contractor's men would drive off with the truck if we went home".

The following day the women filed a written complaint against the *sarpanch* with the Sub-Divisional Magistrate. They also pressurised the forest surveyor to visit the village. They said to him, "Look at the state of our forests. There is not a single green tree left. What action has the forest *panchayat* taken? We do not want a *panchayat* which encourages poaching and stealing. We demand the resignation of the *sarpanch*. From now onwards, we will manage the Forest *Panchayat* ourselves".

The women of Bachher made a firm resolution to protect their forests themselves. They neither lacked courage nor enthusiasm. They were determined to save their forests at any cost. There is no gainsaying the fact that if these women could successfully perform agricultural activities, cattle raising, and other functions then they could also safeguard their forests

effectively. In any case, women do a better job than men because they perceive the forests as their parental home. The only problem is that women need to be made aware and develop confidence in themselves.

This was the first time in the history of Garhwal that a woman was the head of the panchayat and all the members of the panchayat were women. This is a remarkable achievement for all women. These illiterate women through their courage and organisational ability achieved tremendous success, and they became a source of inspiration for other women. These women abandoned their traditional ways of thinking and elected a younger woman as sarpanch.

Following their meeting with the forest surveyor, the women staged a *dharna* outside the Sub Divisional Magistrate's office and shouted, "We demand the resignation of the Forest *sarpanch*. We will not let this corrupt man protect our forests." The SDM took immediate action and the *sarpanch* was forced to resign. In his place a semi-literate women was elected as the *sarpanch*. The male members of the forest *panchayat* refused to accept a woman *sarpanch* and they resigned *en masse*. As a result the hitherto male-dominated *panchayat* had only women members. Kalawati Devi later recalled, "We elected a young women as the *sarpanch*. These young women must be given an opportunity to lead and manage so that the future generations can learn from their experiences".

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women abandoned their traditional ways of thinking and elected a younger woman as *sarpanch* so that other young women and girls would be inspired to action.

Today, these women take all decisions relating to their forests and even frame rules and regulations for the protection of their forests. They passed a law that no one could cut tender twigs or leaves in the forests. A fine would be levied if any animal or cattle strayed into the forests. During the monsoons, every one would be allowed to collect fodder from the forests, and fuelwood would be distributed among the families in the village.

To ensure the security of their forests, the women took a decision and called a meting of the villagers. Kalawati Devi addressed the people assembled there, "We want to safeguard our forests. We want each family to deposit a fee of Rs. 20 per month so that we can hire a *chowkidar* (guard) to keep vigil over the forest." All the people present endorsed this idea and deposited the money. Even though a *chowkidar* was hired to keep vigil, women themselves would also stay up the whole night keeping watch. An afforestation drive was launched every year and soon the whole area was covered with dense forests. According to Kalawati Devi, when women assumed control of the Forest *Panchayat*, there were only Rs. 60 in the *panchayat* exchequer. Since then the amount has increased to Rs. 6,000 and the women hope to raise more money in the future. They have planned to use this money for development activities in the village.

Needless to say that in the hills social change and prosperity can be achieved only by raising consciousness among women. In all projects of rural development, women's participation is imperative. But women must rise to the occasion and fight for their rights and privileges. The women of Bachher took the initiative. Similarly, other women's groups should take the

initiative for social change and social reconstruction. Only then will the effects of change be perceptible.

In addition to protecting their community forests, the women of Bachher also protected government-owned forests. On a summer day, a fire broke out in the government-owned forests. The women rushed to the spot and fearlessly brought the five under control. After the fire had died down, the Divisional Forest Officer arrived on the scene and ordered his men to collect the pieces of charred wood lying on the ground. Hearing this, the women shouted at the DFO, "Listen mister, we will not let you take a single piece of wood from here. You presume that you are the owner of this forest, but where were you when the fire was ravaging the forest? We risked our lives and put out the fire. Therefore this charred wood rightfully belong to us". The DFO was helpless and he went away. Some of these women were rewarded by the block for their fearlessness in fighting the fire.

Apart from safeguarding their forests, these women also struggled to improve their economic status. After considerable debate and discussion, they planted lemon, tangerine and other fruit trees around their houses. They sold the surplus fruit in the market to supplement their income. The women also went on to increase the number of milch cattle in the village. For this purpose, they have formed a women's milk production cooperative society. By selling milk they hope to improve their financial situation. Impressed by the women's awareness and the size of their milch cattle, the Parag Milk Dairy approached these women

The lack of formal education did not in any way prevent them from developing a scientific temper. It is this scientific temperament which has been inspiring them to struggle for the development of their village.

and urged them to form a milk cooperative society. Today, this project is paying rich dividends as a result of which the women have been able to improve their economic situation.

Despite the fact that these women had been deprived of education, they were sharp enough to realise the significance of education. The lack of formal education did not in any way prevent them from developing a scientific temper. It is this scientific temperament which has been inspiring them to struggle for the development of their village. The patriarchal, more dominated society has always regarded them as second class citizens. Women must unite and collectively fight if they want to get out of this trap and earn recognition for their remarkable achievements. Along with their household chores and agricultural functions, the women of Bachher have contributed to the development of their village; in the process they have provided a fine example of social and civil restructuring. It is due to their hard work and struggle over the last 15 years that every woman in Bachher is brimming over with enthusiasm and confidence. One of the women in the village operates a flour mill and earns up to Rs. 2,000 per month. This is no mean achievement in a male-dominated society where all such activities were done by men. If the situation demands, these woman do not hesitate to pressurise government officials to draw their attention to the problems facing them. In January 1993, the entire village was plunged into darkness because the electricity poles were uprooted due to heavy rains and snow. Despite regular reminders by the villagers, the electricity department took no action and Bachher

If other women's organisations draw inspiration from the women of Bachher and work collectively then there will be prosperity all round and there will be no threat to the eco-system.

remained without electricity for 2 whole months. The women of the *Mahila Mangal Dal* then decided to contact the District Magistrate to appraise him of the situation in their village. They said, "In our village the electricity poles have been lying on the roadside for the last 2 months. How long do we have to remain without electricity"? People in the village have not been able to switch on their TV, radio sets. How long will this continue? The DM immediately ordered the electricity department to provide new poles to the village. But transporting these poles posed another problem. Ironically, the men of Bachher were hoping to get a contract to transport these poles to the village and earn some money. But the women had other ideas. They did not want to waste more time so they told the officials of the electricity department, "If your department cannot arrange to transport these poles to the village then our *Mahila Mangal Dal* will do this job. We will carry them to the village, but you must begin work immediately." Within a short time, these brave and bold women carried the heavy poles to their village. They forced the employees of the electricity department to work round the clock and install these poles. Thanks to their efforts, the village had electricity again.

In more ways than one the world of Bachher is unique. Today, the village is making rapid progress because of the hard work and dedication of these women. Realising the collective strength of these women, their menfolk have stopped opposing them. Women facing exploitation or humiliation do not suffer in silence but depend upon the collective strength of the *Mahila Mangal Dal* to tackle the issue. Impressed by their women's work, the men of the village have begun to support and assist them in their community development and welfare programmes. Even the *pradhan* (head) of the village consults them and seeks their views on various projects and programmes.

This is a major victory for these women. Women who once spent all their time toiling at home and in the fields are actively involved in planning projects of community development and rural upliftment. Through their hard work and effort, they have carved a niche for themselves in society. Along with other *Mahila Mangal Dals*, the *Mahila Mangal Dal* of Bachher had the honour of receiving the coveted Indira Priyadarshini Vriksha Mitra award from the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at a ceremony held in New Delhi in 1984. Inspired by the women of Bachher, women in other villages have begun to follow in their footsteps. Today, the *Mahila Mangal Dal* of Bachher has around 50 active members and the *Dal* has also been registered under The State Societies Registration Act. The *Dal* has become so strong today that the moment these women receive information of any new development project in the block, they immediately contact the Block Development Officer so as to avail of the benefits accruing to them from that project.

The major drawback of the *Mahila Mangal Dal* is that none of the members are educated and as a result they have problems completing paper formalities and applications. To ensure that their children are not deprived of the benefits of an education, these women here enrolled their children in school.

On the basis of their hard work and effort, these women of Bachher have transformed their whole world. But there are many villages where women have not been given an opportunity to be in the forefront. Such women tend to be isolated from the outside world and are not able to enjoy the fruits of development. They continue to be victimised by society and are exploited by their men. If perchance they make an attempt to step out of their homes and improve their lot, they are humiliated and criticised for breaking traditional conventions. Unfortunately, there are very few women who can withstand all hardships and

remain unruffled and yet forge ahead on the path of development. If other women's organisations draw inspiration from the women of Bachher and work collectively then there will be prosperity all round and there will be no threat to the eco-system.

WOMEN REFURBISH TANGSA VILLAGE

Nestled between the Govindi and Bal-Khela rivers in Chamoli district of Garhwal is Tangsa village. The village is proud of its natural beauty; it is surrounded by dense forests and the trees in the village are laden with fruit. But the village could not boast of such scenic beauty a decade ago. What we see today is largely due to the struggle and commitment of the women of the village. The contribution of these women towards the preservation and protection of their natural heritage is indeed commendable.

Till a few years ago Tangsa village was plagued with unemployment, poverty and scarcity of resources. To add to the villagers' problems, destruction of forests, wastelands, and landslides were threatening their village to extinction. In an attempt to save the village, the Forest Department in 1976-77 selected a site for afforestation and built a wall around it. However, because of the lack of involvement of the local people in this project, it was not successful.

The women of Tangsa were most worried about the widespread destruction of their forest wealth because they were aware that they would have to face the consequences of ecological imbalance. In the wake of the Chipko movement in Chamoli, the top leaders had impressed upon the women of Tangsa to form an organisation and to join the movement. It was largely due to their efforts that a *Mahila Mangal Dal* was set up in Tangsa with Swati Devi as its President. A meeting of the *Dal* was called and there were prolonged discussions on the state of affairs. Swati Devi addressed the members, "Our problems have increased since our forests have been destroyed, we can neither find fodder for our cattle nor firewood for our cooking. If this continues and we do not find a solution, then it will be impossible to survive".

The women realised the gravity of the problem and they decided to seek help from the Dasholi Gram Swaraj Mandal. During the Chipko agitation, the Dasholi Mandal had forged a relationship with the women of Tangsa. The women discussed their problem with the members of the Dasholi Mandal. After much debate, they decided that the best solution was to launch an afforestation drive in which all the local people would be involved. The *Mahila Mangal Dal* of Tangsa assumed responsibility for implementing this.

The northern part of the village was the most affected, therefore fruit trees were planted there to check further erosion. Similarly, trees were planted all around the village. *Uttees* plants were grown on community lands and *deodar* on private holdings. According to Satyeshwari Devi, a prominent member of the *Mahila Mangal Dal*, "During the last 6-7 years, wastelands in Tangsa have been covered by trees following the afforestation drive. Initially the villagers resisted the ban imposed on cattle grazing in the area. But once they understood the significance of this, they came round to our way of thinking."

Showing great enthusiasm, the *Mahila Mangal Dal* planted saplings of *Baanj, Mitla, Queeral, Amla, Gethi, Timla, Akhrot, Shahtoot, Baken* and *Toan* in the village. They would tend to the plants and regularly water them and add manure. When they saw their efforts bearing fruit, they called a meeting of all the villagers. The women told the villagers, "We have toiled and struggled to afforest this area. It is the responsibility of each person to look after the forests. We are framing some rules for the safety of our forests and all of you must abide by these rules"

The rules stipulated that no one would cut the tender saplings, twigs and leaves in the newly afforested area; the site

for fodder collection and cattle grazing would be restricted; and each person would be responsible for taking care of the saplings.

The women of Tangsa toiled for 2 years to protect and nurture the saplings. Their hard work finally bore fruit and for the first time the villagers were able to collect fodder for their cattle from the afforested area within the village itself. It was then that the villagers realised the significance of the rules laid down by the women.

Rejoicing at their success, a member of the *Dal* remarked, "Ten years ago we had to walk long distances to collect fuelwood and fodder from the forests of the Forest Department. We would leave our homes at 7 a.m. and return with our heavy loads by 2 o' clock in the afternoon, after going without even a morsel of food. Now all these problems are over. We can easily meet all our requirements of fuelwood and fodder from our own forests".

The women of Tangsa must be admired for their decision-making activity. In the face of all odds, and criticism from the villagers, women organised themselves and collectively worked towards greening their village.

There is, no doubt, strength in organising and collective action. If women collectively decide to do something, they always succeed. The women of Tangsa must be admired for their decision-making ability. It was their collective decision that saved their village, their forests and their land. Another unique trait is their organising ability. In the face of all odds, and criticism from the villagers, women organised themselves and collectively worked towards greening their village. Impressed by the achievement of these women, even their critics have begun to laud their work.

According to a member of the *Mahila Mangal Dal*, "Initially women were reluctant to step out of their homes and participate in socially productive work. Then gradually women began to meet once a month for some work or the other. The Dasholi Gram Swaraj Mandal also played a very significant role in showing us the right direction."

When the women saw their efforts bearing fruit, they were inspired. It was due to their inspiration and enthusiasm that they launched an afforestation drive twice without any government support or assistance. As a result all the wastelands, community lands and waysides were planted with trees.

In time the fruit trees were laden with fruits. After meeting their own needs, the surplus fruit was sold in the market. This enabled the villagers to supplement their income. The villagers had worked hard to nurture and protect their trees and they rightly deserved the benefits. Due to their efforts, the age-old problem of firewood and fodder was also solved. Several members of the *Mahila Mangal Dal* were of the opinion, "We no longer face the problem of collecting fodder for our cattle. We must diversify our activities and go in for cattle breeding and dairy farming. For this, we have to buy a few Jersey cows." The suggestion was a good one but the problem of funds loomed large—where to find the funds for buying the Jersey cows? The women of Tangsa decided to discuss the matter with the members of the Dasholi Gram Swaraj Mandal. Once again, the Dasholi Gram Swaraj Mandal came to their rescue and contacted the Department of Animal Husbandry, which arranged a loan from the bank. By selling milk and calves in the market, the villagers were able to repay their loans. The women also hope to earn extra money from the *deodar* trees which they had planted during the afforestation drive. According to a member of the *Mahila Mangal Dal*, "Today we have

enough fodder to meet our requirements. In 1987-88, when a famine broke out in the Talla Nagpur area of the district along with the women of Siroi we collected fodder and sent two truckloads to the affected area to help them in their hour of need."

Today, a woman is the *sarpanch* (head) of Tangsa forest *panchayat* and the other members are also women. Together they are engaged in the ongoing process of protecting and preserving their forests. Their collective endeavour and enthusiasm along with the support of the *Mahila Mangal Dal* have transformed the village. These women play a decisive role in all activities of the village. Following the introduction of the Jawahar Rozgar Yojna in the village, the members of the *Dal* met the village *pradhan* and told him, "We want to set up a maternity home for our women. You have received funds to implement the Jawahar Rozgar Yojna. Instead of investing this money in other activities please give us the money to construct a maternity home". The *pradhan* readily agreed to their suggestion and sanctioned money for the maternity home. The women personally supervised the construction of the maternity home. They also enlisted a Health Worker from the Block Health Centre to regularly visit the home and examine the women admitted there. In addition, some of the members of the *Dal* received training from the Health Worker and became proficient to assist in childbirth. Impressed by the enthusiasm

They should think and ponder over their situation and only then will they be able to rise to the challenge facing them. Development planning thrust upon them by bureaucrats sitting in the cities is not likely to improve their lot. Women have to take the initiative and come forward to help themselves. Genuine development depends on their active participation at the regional level.

and commitment of their womenfolk, the men of Tangsa have begun to actively support the women in all their endeavours. Previously, these men would object to their wives attending the meetings and participating in various activities of the *Mahila Mangal Dal* as they tended to neglect their household chores and agricultural activities. However, with patience and determination these women overcame all hurdles in their way. Today, these women are making long-term plans to ensure all-round development of their village.

Another significant development is that inspite of their heavy workload, the women have begun to think for themselves. Today, the *Mahila Mangal Dal* in Tangsa has over 50 members and has been registered under the State Societies Registration Act. In their future agenda, top priority has been accorded to the upgradation of the school in the village. For this, they are organising a mass movement and have enlisted the support of the school management committee. They also want to expand cattle raising and horticultural activities to supplement their income. If any women in the village has a problem, they discuss it from various angles and find a solution to it.

The greatest drawback of these *Mahila Mangal Dals* is the lack of coordination between them. There is no network to forge greater unity and strengthen links at a regional level. Community consciousness is restricted to the village level. They are unable to articulate themselves collectively on common issues through a wider platform. As a result, issues concerning them do not receive any attention in the press or media and tend to remain trivial issues of individual villages.

There is no gainsaying the fact that unless women do not rise to the occasion and help themselves their progress is not possible. They should think and ponder over their situation

and only then will they be able to rise to the challenge facing them. Development planning thrust upon them by bureaucrats sitting in the cities is not likely to improve their lot. Women have to take the initiative and come forward to help themselves. Genuine development depends on their active participation at the regional level.

BHAGIRATHI—SEVEN SISTERS

Bhagirathi Seven Sisters Adventure Club founded by seven sisters of Uttarakhand imparts training to young women in adventurous and daring activities. It is due to the efforts of this organisation that the first ever an all-women team to climb Mt. Everest was trained. Further, credit goes to the club that Bachendri Pal, a member of the club, became the first Indian woman to scale Mt. Everest in 1984 and became the leader of the all-women team to Mt. Everest in May 1993. Under her able guidance, the team successfully completed its mission.

The geographical conditions in the hills are harsh and as a result the life of hill dwellers is rife with hardships. The hilly region of Uttarakhand is marked by steep mountain tracks, snow-clad mountains and terraced fields: the people living and working there become accustomed to handling difficult and threatening situations. Hailing from different districts of Garhwal region in Uttarakhand, these seven courageous sisters assisted by Brigadier Gyan Singh established the Seven Sisters Adventure Club (Bhagirathi - Seven Sisters) in 1983, involved in adventurous activities like mountaineering. These seven sisters also encourage and train young girls to participate in similar activities.

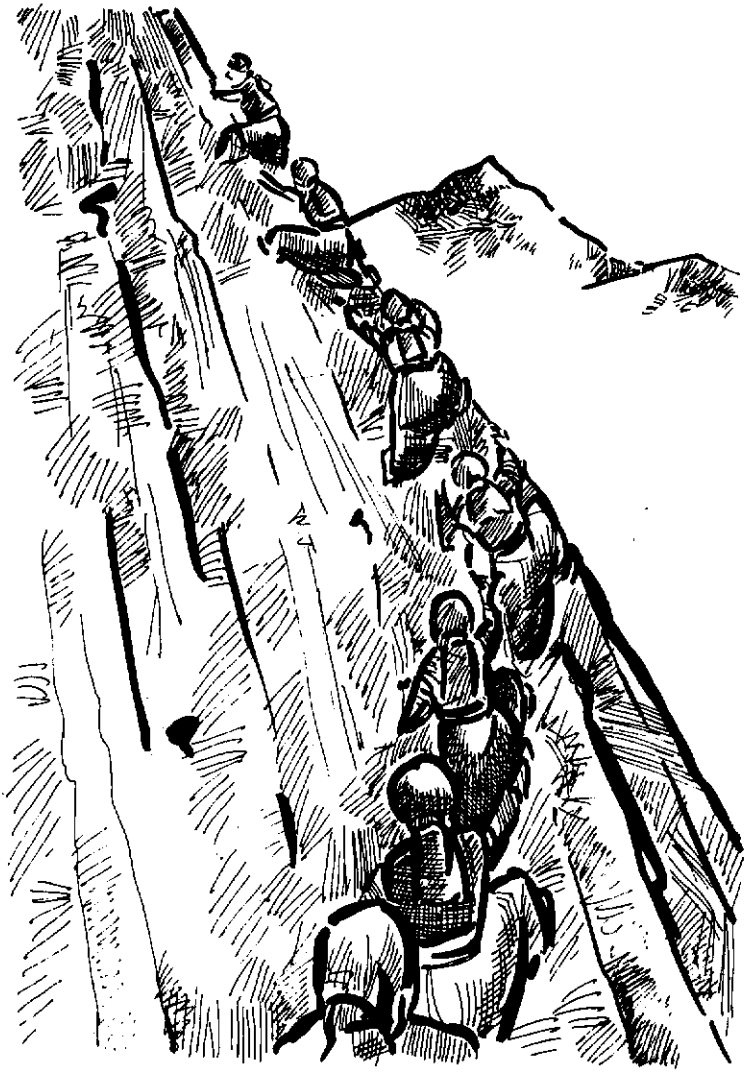
The primary aim of the club was to train women mountaineers. Prior to the establishment of the club, parents were reluctant to permit their daughters to join mixed groups of climbers, thus depriving them of the opportunity to learn mountaineering and earn fame for themselves. The unique characteristic of the Seven Sisters Club is that it is an all-women organisation and it is managed exclusively by women.

It all began in 1983 when Brigadier Gyan Singh arrived in Uttarkashi to conduct adventure courses. He had to select 28 young men and 12 young women for the course. However, there was only one young schoolgirl from Delhi.

But Brigadier Gyan Singh was keen to include more women in the course. Hence, several women from the Garhwal region were selected. They were Bachendri Pal, Asha Rani, Uma Bhatt, Vijaya Pant, Anita Rekhi, Kunti Rana and Lakshmi Pundeer. All these women had completed basic and advanced courses in mountaineering at the Nehru Mountaineering Institute in Uttarkashi. Following their selection, these young women told the Brigadier, "We are very enthusiastic about doing this course but we have a personal problem. Now that our formal education is over, our parents are putting pressure on us to get married. Please design a scheme whereby we can get some kind of employment and help our parents monetarily."

Although the families of these women would constantly encourage and inspire them yet the problems of their families were staring them in the face. Realising the complexity of the situation, the Brigadier acted promptly and asked these women to apply for the membership of the National Adventure Foundation, of which he was the Director, and established the Seven Sisters Adventure Club. The renowned mountaineer Chandraprabha was appointed the President of the Club and Bachendri Pal became the Vice-President of the club. The club provides financial assistance to those deserving women who are deprived of the opportunity to develop their potential, merit and courage because of poverty and socio- economic constraints.

The seven sisters are not lacking in self-confidence and mental strength. Since childhood they have spent their time in outdoor pursuits: roaming around in the dense forests, climbing steep mountains and snow-clad hilltops. Even as children they expressed a strong desire to scale the various mountains of the Himalayan range.



The first ever Indian women to scale Mt. Everest, Bachendri Pal, is the daughter of Kishen Singh and Hansa Pal of Bumpa village which lies on the borders of Chamoli district. In spite of economic constraints, through sheer hard work and determination Bachendri Pal obtained her M.A. and B.Ed. degrees. Interested in outdoor sports and adventurous activities even as a child, Bachendri Pal enrolled in the Nehru Mountaineering Institute upon completion of her education. The desire to be a world class mountaineer was always uppermost in her mind.

The training course at the Institute covered all aspects of mountaineering—scaling snow-clad and rocky mountains, rope climbing, camping, etc. Taking a keen interest in the training, Bachendri Pal graduated with flying colours. Upon the completion of her training she devoted herself to the activities of the Seven Sisters Adventure Club. During the training programme organised by the club, Bachendri Pal in an attempt to unite and encourage the young women of Uttarkashi, established the young *Mahila Mangal Dal*. The *Dal* organises campaigns to mobilise and create awareness among the illiterate women in villages scattered all over Garhwal.

The Seven Sisters Club enabled women like Bachendri Pal, Vijaya Pant and the other young women to realise their talent and demonstrate their fearlessness. This club has encouraged and inspired many young girls of the hills, and has also trained them to readily face the challenges posed by adventurous sports like mountaineering.

In June 1983, Brigadier Gyan Singh arranged to supply 25 sets of camping and training equipment to the club so as to enable the club to organise two adventure courses simultaneously. In the first course there were 13 women from TISCO in Jamshedpur, and the second course included 15 women from Shillong. Local women

were also selected for these adventure courses and they were divided into two groups of 20 women each.

It was a thrilling experience for the Seven Sisters Club. All the participants enrolled in the course were women and so were their trainers. The training course included rock climbing, crossing rivers, camping, rope climbing, crossing dense forests, etc. Bachendri Pal was the director of the course and Vijaya Pant was the deputy director.'Quarter master' and 'medical aid' was under the charge of other women.

The course was a challenge and a test of the women's own experience and training. The entire course was managed by the Seven Sisters Club; guided by their own training experiences they executed their task cautiously and responsibly and gave fine display of their admirable fearlessness and mental strength. The young trainees were so impressed by the seven sisters' self-confidence, courage and cooperation that they enthusiastically underwent the arduous training. In the first course, the trainees scaled a height of 4,000 meters in Bakriyan Khal. The successful completion of this course was primarily due to these women's enthusiasm, dedication and determination. The second course was also successfully completed by the seven sisters.

The Seven Sisters Adventure Club is not only famous in the Uttarakhand region but has also earned nationwide repute because of its daring activities. Its fame spread far when its President, Bachendri Pal, was selected for an expedition to Mt. Everest in 1984. Astonishing everyone with her brilliant performance in expedition after expedition, she finally sealed the 7,500 meters high Mana Peak. Facing formidable challenges, on 23 May 1984 at 7 minutes past 1 O'clock in the afternoon Bachendri Pal stood atop Mt. Everest and unfurled the Indian tricolour. This Indian woman did the Seven Sisters Club and her country proud.

Another achievement of the Club was that Bachendri Pal led an all-women climbers team of India and Nepal to Mt. Everest. Bachendri Pal who was the brain behind this expedition had started work on it as early as 1989. The Indian Mountaineering Institute was planning a all-women international team for an expedition to Mt. Everest. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Bachendri Pal put forth the proposal that the expedition be organised by Indian women alone. After some initial hesitation, her proposal was promptly accepted. Later, women of Nepal were also included in the team. The most significant feature of this all women campaign was that it was planned, organised and executed by women themselves. This is a matter of pride and honour not only for Indian women but also for women all over the world. According to Bachendri Pal, the leader of the team, "Taking a decision to launch an expedition and planning and organising it is as difficult and challenging as climbing the highest mountain". Bachendri Pal along with her team of climbers successfully completed this expedition and established many new records.

Taking a decision to launch an expedition and planning and organising it is as difficult and challenging as climbing the highest mountain

The all-women mountaineering team of India and Nepal included five important climbers from the border districts of Uttarkashi. They were Harsha, Suman Kautiyal, Vimla Negi, Deepa Sharma and Anita Devi. These women had undergone basic and advanced training at the Nehru Mountaineering Institute and had also been instructed by Chandraprabha Atwar of the Seven Sisters Adventure Club. These women had scaled many peaks in the past and were well-known climbers. Following the establishment of the Seven Sisters Adventure Club, an increasing number of young women of Uttarakhand

began to participate in mountaineering expeditions and always succeeded in their mission.

Today, Bachendri Pal is Deputy Divisional Manager in the Tata Iron and Steel Company (TISCO), Jamshedpur. Under the aegis of TISCO she has led young men and women on several expeditions. At the time of the devastating earthquake in Uttarkashi in 1991, Bachendri Pal was in Agora with her team and they collected lakhs of rupees for relief measures.

Amita Rekhi of the Seven Sisters Club has got married but she has not lost interest in mountaineering. Accompanied by her husband, she often goes on long treks. Chandraprabha Atwal, formerly a primary school teacher, has been appointed officer on Special Duty Adventure in Uttarkashi because of her courageous and daring achievements.

The Seven Sisters Adventure Club is famous the world over. The women of this institute have proven beyond doubt that women are not inferior to men in physical strength. At present, Sarla Negi is the President of the Club. The Club encourages women to realise their potential. Its future plans include encouraging an increasing number of women to realise their full potential and to help them secure good jobs.

Drawing inspiration from the Seven Sisters Adventure Club, women in other fields should also step forward. If the courageous women of the Seven Sisters Adventure Club can scale the highest peak—Mt. Everest—because of their rare courage, dedication and firm determination then why cannot other women of the hills unite to surmount their seemingly endless problems?

WOMEN OF KHOLA STRUGGLE AGAINST LIQUOR ABUSE

It is said that one and one make eleven; five fingers when closed is called a fist. It is also true that there is more strength in the fist compared to each individual finger. Similarly, in the event of a problem, if collective effort is made then it is likely to be successfully resolved.

Nestled among the hills is Tehri district of Garhwal where small houses, women toiling in their terrace farms and cattle grazing in the pastures speak volumes of the breathtaking scenic beauty of the region. There are many small villages scattered all over Tehri Garhwal. One such *Gram Sabha* is Khola. The inhabitants of these villages, particularly women, have to struggle in the face of many hardships. Among the factors contributing to their misery is the large number of illicit distilleries in the region. As a consequence, not only men but even children have been caught in the grip of this social evil.

In Khola, there is a village which is largely inhabited by Harijans who are primarily engaged in producing illicit liquor. Since they do not own any agricultural land, the men work as labourers to earn their daily living. After toiling the whole day, they spend their evenings drinking and return home drunk every night only to beat their wives. The harassed and battered women would often complain, "You spend all the money on liquor when there is not a grain in the house. Look at the children, they have gone to sleep hungry. Don't you have any mercy left? If you don't care about me at least think of the children's future". Hearing this the husband would become more angry and abusive: "Shut up, how dare you lecture me? It is my money, I have earned it! Will spend it as I please. Who are you to tell me what to do?" Then he would proceed to shower blows on her. Such occurrences were not confined to one or two households but were common in the entire village. Women were miserable because they had to face the

consequences of this evil habit. They wanted to rid their men of this habit. Women in households engaged in the production of illicit liquor were equally keen to check this social evil.

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There is no doubt that liquor is a dangerous poison which not only destroys a person's mental and physical health but also affects his family members. Just as one bad fish ruins the entire pond so also one person's addiction ruins the entire family. This evil is rapidly spreading in this region and is destroying the entire social fabric.

When the women of Khola could no longer tolerate the injustice heaped upon them, they decided to tackle the problem on their own. They were able to empathise with each other because each one of them was facing the same problem. One of the women suggested that they contact the lady in charge of Women's Rehabilitation Programme and discuss their problem with her. All the women readily agreed and approached the person who said, "We have a grave problem and a big challenge before us. If all the women unite and wage a battle against the users and producers of liquor, then victory is bound to be ours." Hearing this, the women assembled said, "We are one and we will cooperate with you under all circumstances. We will not even hesitate to oppose our husbands if the situation so demands. We are determined to root out this evil from our village. We cannot tolerate the injustice meted out to us anymore"

All the women took a solemn vow that they would not succumb to any pressures in this battle against liquor. Assisted by the lady in charge of the Programme, they organised several meetings in the village and accompanied by the women whose husbands were involved in the illicit liquor racket they went to meet them. These women told their husbands, "Stop your nefarious activities and do some other work instead. This liquor is destroying the whole village".

Although the men involved in this racket earned good money yet their women were not happy with the money earned in this way They did not want their husbands to resort to illegal means to earn money and they would be content with two square meals so long as it was not earned by depriving others and reducing them to penury. On this issue all the women here united. They had got together to root out a common evil which was affecting all of them.

The producers, sensing a revolt in their households, brutally beat up their wives and said, "You want to close down my business then what will you eat? When you do not get to eat then you will realise what you are doing." The women would protest that they would rather toil than use the money earned by illegal means.

Several men forbade their women from attending meetings. Nevertheless, they continued to attend the meetings and organised raids on the distilleries in the village and destroyed all the stocks. Their action led to a fear psychosis and the men began to hide their stocks of liquor and no one would drink openly. The liquor traders soon realised the collective strength of women and it dawned upon them that they would not be able to continue their notorious activities for long.

One day a person came to a Harijan's house in the village. Bhagirathi, who was on her way to collect fodder, saw the man pouring something from a kettle into a glass and quickly drinking it. She signaled to another woman and said, "I think that this man is drinking liquor because if he was drinking tea then he could not have gulped it down so fast". Both the women accosted the man and their suspicions were confirmed. The man was drinking liquor. Angered by what they saw, they threw away the glass and picked up the kettle. The man was taken aback and shouted at them to return the kettle. Bhagirathi said angrily, "You drink and then you try to threaten us. You just wait, we will teach you a lesson today." Saying this, she began to beat the man with a stick. Fearing for his life, the man took to his heels. Bhagirathi then turned to the owner of the house and said, In spite of our repeated requests you have continued your nefarious activities.

There is no doubt that women are a mine of hidden strength. Once they decide to use their collective strength to achieve something then no one can block their way. This has been amply demonstrated by the women of Khola.

You are an enemy of the village. But today we will not spare you. And both women began to beat the owner. By then there was an uproar and other women also joined them. They searched the whole house and found barrels of liquor stored in one of the rooms. Enraged by this, a woman shouted, "These rascals will not learn like this. Unless they rot in jail they will not come to their senses". Other women also joined in and began shouting that they should be sent to prison. Even the liquor traders' wives were actively involved in this struggle and they were keen to see their husbands get out of this racket.

Shouting slogans, nearly a thousand women marched to the Sub District Magistrate's office and began to protest. They urged the SDM to take action against the offenders and arrest

them. The SDM immediately issued orders for the arrest of the guilty. The police, accompanied by the women, reached the village and promptly arrested all the culprits. None of the liquor traders' wives present there protested against the detention of their erring husbands. They simply told their husbands, "We had warned you earlier to stop your nefarious activities. Now you must face the consequences of your actions." This was the real test of their unity—the women remained true to their word and did not falter in their conviction of rooting out this evil from their villages.

It is generally believed that women are patient and tolerant like the Mother Earth. But history tells us that women have often assumed fierce forms - such as those of the goddess Chandi or Durga - to safeguard the larger interests of mankind. Time and again women's hidden strength has been manifested in various forms. There is no doubt that women are a mine of hidden strength. Once they decide to use their collective strength to achieve something then no one can block their way. This has been amply demonstrated by the women of Khola.

Following the arrests, the women warned the villagers not to arrange bail for the arrested men. Failing which, they and their families would be boycotted socially. The fear of being ostracised had the desired effect and no one was willing to stand bail for the imprisoned men. The men remained in prison for 2 whole weeks and were finally released when their bail was arranged by their distant relatives. The men returned to their homes but were ashamed of themselves and begged for pardon. They told their women, "You women have tremendous strength. From today onwards no one will make liquor in this village." And since then liquor trade has been completely wiped out.

Due to their unity, enthusiasm and determination these women were successful in their mission. If collective effort is made then even an insurmountable problem can be easily resolved. There is no doubt that determination is a very important factor in achieving one's goals. Cooperation and determination are the key words for success. The women of Khola gave a fine display of cooperation and determination in their struggle against the liquor barons. It goes without saying that in the process they had to oppose even their husbands. They relentlessly continued their struggle in spite of the physical and mental pain inflicted upon them by their family members and others. Neglecting their household chores, all the women of the village worked hard to achieve their goal. On the strength of their cooperation and determination they were able to free their men from this vice. These women have provided a model for all to emulate. If women in the villages sincerely unite to fight against the evils in their society there is no doubt that they will be successful. The need of the hour is for women to come together and unite and in this unity lies their strength.

WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO NATIONAL SMALL SAVING SCHEMES

It has often been suggested that men and women are like the two wheels of this vehicle called society. Progress of society depends upon the movement of both the wheels. On one hand, men contribute to social and national development through their physical and intellectual endeavours. On the other, women in their own way serve the nation and society Whether it is instilling the right values in their children so that they make good leaders of the country, or serving their country by holding important public offices, or saving to contribute to the nation's progress, women's contribution cannot be underestimated.

In the Aikeshwar Development Area of Pauri Garhwal lies a small village called Dhoor -- about 2 km from Aikeshwar. Like other villages of Uttarakhand, this village too faces water and energy problems. A notable feature of the villages of Uttarakhand is the widespread awareness among women at the village level. Although at the block and district level this awareness is almost non- existent, yet at the village level awareness of problems is very high among women and from time to time they have united to solve their problems. In July 1992, the women of Dhoor village established a *Mahila Mangal Dal* to tackle the problems of water and energy in their village. The Secretary of the Human Development and Environment Institute, Pauri Garhwal, Shri S P Badola was instrumental in inspiring these women to establish a *Mahila Mangal Dal* in Dhoor. Manju Badola, an educated and enlightened woman of the village, began to organise the women of Dhoor. In the beginning only 9 women joined the *Dal*. Mr. Badola had explained the gravity of the situation to their husbands before they were permitted to join the *Dal*. Soon, however, the *Mahila Mangal Dal* was registered under the State Societies Registration Act.

Under the guidance of Manju Badola, the women of Dhoor organised themselves to work for the development of their village. The meeting of Aikeshwar Development Unit was scheduled to be held on 8 November 1992 and the District Magistrate Rajeev Kumar was expected to preside over the meeting. Keen on availing of this opportunity to make the DM aware of the problems facing them, Manju Badola called a

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meeting and addressed the women, "At this meeting we should draw the DM's attention to our problems of water and energy by protesting silently." Since all the women were facing these problems, they agreed to cooperate. The DM was very impressed by the manner in which they had registered their protest and he invited them to discuss their problems. The women described their problems in great detail and the DM reassured them that the administration would take adequate measures to solve these problems. The DM's words rekindled a ray of hope and the women sat through the meeting attentively listening to the views of the *Dal* on other issues. During the course of the meeting, the DM also stressed the importance of national small savings schemes for the economic upliftment of the oppressed groups of society The meeting concluded and everyone dispersed.

The DM's talk on the national small savings schemes made a deep impression on Manju Badola. She decided to launch such schemes in the village. She called a meeting of the *Mahila Mangal Dal,* andemphasising the benefits of small savings she said, "Small savings schemes will not only benefit us but will also benefit the nation. By participating in such schemes we can contribute to nation building. For this, each one of us should deposit a sum of Rs. 100 per month in the local post office"

Explaining the significance of savings to these women was not an easy task. Some of the members understood but many of them could not appreciate the significance of depositing money every month. To add to the confusion, there were some anti-social elements at work in the village. Manju Badola, however, did not give up; she won the women's confidence and they agreed to support the scheme wholeheartedly. Manju Badola's dogged perseverance had finally paid off and it was a fitting reply to the anti-social elements in the village who were trying to sabotage the scheme.

After the launching of the scheme in the village, the local post office issued passbooks to the women. The village *pradhan* and Manju Badola assisted the women in completing all the formalities. On 13 April they deposited a sum of Rs. 38,500 in the post office. By 13 May this amount had increased to Rs. 95,100. Once again, S P Badola of the Human Development and Environment Institute, was instrumental in encouraging the women. Today, there are 47 RDS passbooks in which Rs. 4,900 is deposited every month. In addition to this, the women of Dhoor have opened long-term accounts, thereby providing assistance to the District Administration as well as contributing to the development of the nation. Inspired by the savings programme of Dhoor, women in other villages of Aikeshwar Development Area have also launched similar schemes in their villages. It should be noted here that in the month of April, Aikeshwar sub-post office issued over 80 passbooks. As a consequence of these singular achievements, the *Mahila Mangal Dal* of Dhoor ranked first in the small savings programme in the entire Aikeshwar block.

It was not an easy task making these women understand the significance of savings schemes. Added to this was the problem of middlemen with vested interests who would corner all the

funds earmarked for government supported programmes for rural development and deprive the villagers of the benefits. However, the success of the national savings scheme not only defeated their nefarious intentions but also proved that these village women were concerned about village as well as national development.

In addition to these activities, the *Mahila Mangal Dal* of Dhoor has organised several family welfare programmes. According to several women including Manju Rawat, Lakshmi Rawat, Kailashi Devi and Savita Badola, if vocational training is provided to the women at the village level then a majority of them would be able to avail of the training. Although there are training centres at the block level, yet only the nearby villages are able to avail of the training imparted in these centres. Women in remote areas neither participate in any government programmes nor enjoy the benefits accruing from these programmes.

Today, the *Mahila Mangal Dal* of Dhoor has around 34 members actively involved in rural development activities. Also the *Dal's* operations have been expanded to cover the entire *Gram Sabha* of Maletha. The *Dal's* future agenda includes raising silkworms and producing silk which in local parlance is known as *resham* village. In this connection, the *Dal* has initiated a dialogue with the Human Development and Environment Institute, Pauri Garhwal. In addition, a proposal for the acquisition of 50 acres of land for this project has been presented to the Institute. Other activities proposed by the *Dal* include a nutritious food programme and a *balwadi* programme.

The biggest hurdle, however, is lack of funds. So far no development agency has provided monetary assistance to these women. The *Mahila Mangal Dal* has contacted the Department of Animal Husbandry at Aikeshwar to organise a

training programme in animal husbandry at *pashulok* at Gopeshwar or at Rishikesh.

There is no gainsaying the fact the unflinching courage is required to launch any new development activity in rural areas. Without action there cannot be any fruit. It is a strange paradox that in spite of being an important segment of the society, women have to struggle relentlessly to make their presence felt in any field. Whenever women in a traditional set-up step outside the four walls of their home, they are ridiculed and harassed by their men. The situation is worse in rural areas where women are expected to be good wives and mothers. People who are opposed to women's development are myopic because they forget that women's development means the development of their families, their villages, their society and their country. Even if only one woman is educated in a family it is like educating the whole family.

The women of Dhoor also found themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of humiliation and ridicule. Using but their common sense, intelligence and self-confidence they were able to liberate themselves and achieve remarkable success. They are optimistic about their future agenda and are confident that they will succeed.

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THE WOMEN OF UPRADI

There exists a direct relationship between women and forests. Women alone can manage and protect forests effectively. This is clearly evident from the widespread awareness of the protection of forests among the women of Uttarakhand. Located in the Himalayas, this region has numerous villages where women are engaged in a relentless struggle to protect and preserve their reserved and community forest wealth.

Upradi is a small village in the Naugaon block of Uttarkashi. Timber smugglers and poachers have virtually reduced the green forest-belt around the area into a wasteland of stumps. The women of Upradi were naturally concerned about the wanton destruction of their forests because they met their daily requirements of fuelwood and fodder from these forests. In short, their very survival depended on these forests. In spite of this threat to their survival, the women were helpless because there was no *Mahila Mangal Dal* in the village which could have been used as a platform to mobilise women against this destruction. There was one woman in the village—Premwati Devi—who was most concerned about this and she began to think of ways of saving the forests. She began to keep vigil over the forests and would reprimand poachers and smugglers and drive them away.

It was common knowledge that the Nepalese Gorkhas would often go into the forest in search of fuelwood. One day when Premwati Devi was out on a vigil she ran into a Nepalese carrying a huge load of fuelwood from the forest. She accosted him, threw down his load and reprimanded him for stealing from the forest. The man ran away leaving the load of fuelwood behind but soon returned accompanied by the village *pradhan*. The *pradhan* menacingly said to her, "Who are you to stop him from cutting wood? Do you think that these forests belong to you?" Premwati Devi was alone at that time but she was a courageous woman. She told the *pradhan,*

"These forests belong to the women. If our forests are destroyed we women have to face the consequences. Even though you are

the head of the village you are neither concerned about protecting the forests nor about the problems facing women." A heated argument ensued and the *pradhan* finally left in anger.

When the women of the village heard of the encounter with the *pradhan*, they were impressed by Premavati Devi's courage. They began to support her in her struggle against the destruction of the forests. Premwati Devi talked to the women and urged them to establish a *Mahila Mangal Dal* in the village. It was largely due to her efforts that a *Mahila Mangal Dal* was soon established in Upradi and she was unanimously elected its first President. All the members of the *Dal* took a vow to safeguard their forests. Premwati Devi addressed the women, "If you find someone poaching in the forests, net him and we will have him arrested. We must make a firm resolve that none of us will collect fuelwood or leaves from the forests"

Needless to say, if women resolve to do something then they will not rest till they have accomplished it. Even if they have to face innumerable hardships in the process. If women have the determination then no power on earth can break their indomitable spirit.

All the women abided by the rules laid down by the *Dal* and kept vigil over the entire forest area. Poachers learnt to their surprise that they were no match for these courageous and determined women. They were afraid to even enter the forests. By setting an example, these women saved their forests from further destruction and successfully reforested the area.

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Mangal Dal of Upradi also decided to tackle other problems facing the village.

The men of Upradi were covertly trying to undermine the spirit of these women. They could not accept the idea of women forming an organisation and enjoying administrative power over them. However, the women had realised the benefits of organising themselves and they could not be dissuaded by their men. According to Premwati Devi, "We women have taken over *rakhee bandhan*, whenever men held a meeting in the village, they would frame new rules but not once were they successful. We imposed restrictions on the free grazing of cattle in the forests and severely punished those who violated the rules. Today, these rules have become a convention in the village and it is entirely due to the perseverance of women."

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In addition to safeguarding their forests, the women of Upradi launched a protest against the widespread consumption of liquor in the village. As the President of the *Dal*, Premwati Devi took upon herself the task of mobilising women against this social evil. She explained to the other women, "Liquor has destroyed the menfolk of our village. Every day there is a brawl in the village. We must explain to men the evils of drinking and if they still insist on drinking then we must report the matter to the police."

All the women in the village were troubled by their husbands' drinking habit so they decided to support Premwati Devi. Seeing the united stand taken by the women, men hesitated to go out of the house drunk. But they began to torment the

women at home. When these women discussed this problem with Premwati Devi, she said, "If your husband harasses you after getting drunk, just call me. I will come and talk to him. If he refuses to listen then I will report the matter to the police."

In their fight against alcoholism women tended to have frequent rows with their men which made them miserable. Nevertheless, several men gave up drinking either due to the fear of the police or because of the militant stand taken by women. Having successfully tackled the problem of alcoholism in the village, Premwati Devi along with other women organised demonstrations against alcoholism at the district level. They went from village to village mobilising women and setting up combat squads to seize liquor stocks and apprehend drunken men.

One day, women from several villages took out a procession and met the District Magistrate. They demonstrated in front of the District Magistrate's office and raised slogans against the evil in the area. The DM met the women and asked them about their problems. The women told him, "You remain so engrossed in planning that you are not even aware that the very fabric of this society is being destroyed by illicit liquor consumption. And we women are the victims of this social malady." The DM concurred with the women and issued orders for stern action against those manufacturing liquor."

The women then went from village to village mobilising other women and inspiring them to fight this evil. It is largely due to the efforts of these women that a large number of persons manufacturing illicit liquor were arrested. Women themselves raided several liquor dens and seized stocks of liquor. However, this evil has not been rooted out completely and women are relentlessly waging their battle.

There is no village in Uttarakhand where women do not face the problem of alcoholism. The plight of those women is worse whose husbands toil the whole day to earn their living and then blow up their wages on liquor in the evening and come home only to fight with their wives and children. The life of women in the hills is fraught with hardships and an alcoholic husband adds to their problems. Apart from state owned liquor shops, men have begun to manufacture illicit liquor at home. This social malady cannot be rooted out until the government declares Uttrakhand a dry area. For women, however, it is an ongoing struggle. The government should also take steps to combat this widespread problem.

Following the drive against alcohol, Premwati Devi inspired the women of Upradi to work for the welfare and education of girls. Setting an example, Premwati Devi has encouraged her daughter to be as educated as her sons. She would tell other women, "We should not discriminate between sons and daughters. We should educate our daughters so that they can become independent and self-reliant." She was criticised by the elders of the village for propagating such ideas. They castigated her saying, "You have educated your daughter but you have not been able to arrange a suitable match for her. You know how difficult it is to find a boy for an educated girl." She would retort, "Even if my daughter does not get married, she will be able to support herself. But your daughters will remain ignorant all their lives. Just give this a thought."

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Even in the face of severe criticism Premwati Devi did not lose hope and encouraged other women to educate their daughters. As a result of her ceaseless efforts, quite a few young

girls in Upradi were enrolled in school. Premwati Devi also struggled to improve the economic status of older girls and married women of the village. She met the Block Development Officer (BDO) and requested him to organise technical training and education for women so that they could become self-reliant and independent. Largely due to her efforts, 10 to 12 girls of Upradi were trained in sewing, knitting and making jams and jellies. At present, there are between 20 to 25 active members of the *Mahila Mangal Dal* who assist Premwati Devi in all the activities of the *Dal*. The *Mahila Mangal Dal* of Upradi has been registered under the State Societies Registration Act.

Working tirelessly for the development of her village, despite all odds, Premwati Devi is actively engaged in development work, working tirelessly for the development of her village.Even though she is 62 years old, age has not diminished her spirit and confidence. She has plans to assist those men and women who are old and lonely. Some of these people have children living in the cities but they have forgotten their parents. In recognition of her unique ability and heightened awareness, Premwati Devi was nominated member of the Area Committee. As the only women member of the Committee, she attends all its meetings and apprises the administration of the problems facing the village. Impressed by her achievements, the youth of Upradi assist her in all her activities.

There are many unsung heroines in Uttarakhand, each working silently in her own way for the development of the region. Because of lack of communication facilities and dissemination of information, their contribution goes unnoticed and is not recognised by society at large. Beyond the reach of the media, these women continue to toil selflessly for the upliftment of other women. Society must honour such women and encourage them in their efforts; furthermore, an attempt should be made to highlight their achievements so that their example can inspire others. It is, indeed, unfortunate when the local administration under pressure fails to commend such achievements. All of us must make sure that the spark of consciousness which has been ignited, does not die out but its glow spreads in all directions and inspires women in other areas to come forward.

THE AGITATION OF KHEERAKOT WOMEN AGAINST MINING AND EXCAVATION

Located in the middle of the Himalayas, the Uttarakhand region comprises the areas of Garhwal and Kumaon. Kumaon in turn includes Almora, Nainital and Pithoragarh districts. In Almora district lies a small village known as Kheerakot. As in other hilly areas, women of Kheerakot are responsible for agricultural activities, cattle rearing, collecting fuelwood, fodder and water. They work long hours from 5.30 in the morning till 10 in the night.

Kheerakot had its own community forests and the village women would collect fuelwood and fodder from these forests. Poaching in these forests was fairly common. This practice continued unchecked leading to the devastation of the rich forests. As a result of the loss of forest cover, the village women found it increasingly difficult to meet their daily requirements of fuelwood and fodder. Alarmed by the threat to their survival, these women decided to take action to safeguard their forests. Around 10 to 12 women decided that they would not collect fuelwood and fodder from these forests.

Later they called a meeting of all the women of the village and explained to them the gravity of the situation. "We must save our forests. Outsiders go into our forests and steal fuelwood and fodder. We have to face the consequences. We must protect our forests". Some of the women suggested that they build a wall or a fence around the forests so that no one could enter the forests. After prolonged discussions, a site was earmarked for afforestation where no one was allowed to even cut grass. They eagerly waited for the rains as saplings grow faster during the monsoons.

It is evident from the above discussion that whenever there is a threat to the forests or to the ecological balance it is women who are more concerned than men. Men play a limited role in the hills. They are usually involved only in ploughing of the

fields. All other activities like sowing, reaping, harvesting, irrigation and collecting fodder are performed by the women. Thus, women are aware that loss of forest cover means an increase in their workload: they would have to traverse long distances in search of fuelwood and fodder. Similarly, if water resources become dry, they would have to carry water over long distances. Hence, the protection and preservation of forests remain their primary concern. In Kheerakot too, the women were concerned about their forests.

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Meanwhile in 1977, a contractor from Kanpur obtained a license for mining *sailkhadi* stone from the surrounding hills. When the work began, men from Kheerakot were hired for the purpose. The site which had been selected for afforestation earlier was used as a dumping ground for the debris. The women saw their efforts come to naught. Moreover, the road leading to the proposed site of afforestation was used to transport stones on ponies. The women had to wait for the ponies to pass before they could walk to their sites. They approached the men of the village and asked them to look into the matter. But the men helplessly said, "It is difficult to stop the work because the contractor is a very influential man. Not only does he have money but also the support of the government. We cannot take any action against him."

The women realised that they were helpless. But when the dust from the mining activity began to affect their children's health, they told the men, "The dust is polluting our water and our children are falling ill after drinking the polluted water. Are we going to do something or do we have to suffer in silence?."

We will protest against the mining in our area. It is not only destroying our habitat but is also threatening the survival of our future generations.

In the meantime the monsoons broke out. Due to the rains, thick layers of dust and debris settled on the fields and the agricultural land became hard as rock. It became increasingly difficult to till the land. Seeing this, the women lost their patience and informed their husbands of their decision; "If you men cannot do anything to stop this, we will protest against the mining in our area. It is not only destroying our habitat but is also threatening the survival of our future generations."

The women of Kheerakot had been impressed by the work done by Laxmi Ashram in Kausani. This organisation had staged protests against mining and excavations in the region because these activities were destroying the livelihood of the local inhabitants as well as depriving them of their traditional rights. They called a meeting of all the women of the village and one of the women named Kunti Devi addressed them, "All our efforts to regenerate our forests have come to naught. The area we had earmarked for afforestation is covered with stones. Our fields have become barren wastelands because of this mining activity. We must act immediately. Let us talk to the contractor. Forget about the men, let us protest against this mining". This group of angry women marched off to meet the contractor. They requested him to stop all mining work immediately. But the contractor refused to even listen to them. Angered by his response, the women, assisted by the youth of the village, stopped all mining activity and blocked the path used by the ponies to carry loads of stones. Realising that the mine was destroying them, the youth of the village also joined the women in their agitation. The women also requested Laxmi Ashram in Kausani for support. Together they formed an action

committee and the anti-mining agitation gained momentum. However, the contractor filed a case against the villagers.

Not daunted by the contractor's action, the women intensified their agitation to protect their habitat and their heritage. They decided to file a case against the contractor. They went from door to door to raise funds for meeting the expenses. The case dragged on for 2 years and they had to spend Rs. 5,000 on expenses. But they did not lose heart and were determined to stop all mining operations in the area. They told the contractor, "Before you destroy these hills you will have to kill us. So long as we are alive we will not let you ruin our lives and the future of our progeny."

Their enthusiasm and determination knew no bounds. They were not willing to give up and were determined to fight till the end. Brimming over with confidence, they presented a picture of tremendous strength and unity. Prepared to face any threat to their person or property, these women never once wavered. The contractor threatened them, their houses and even set fire to the shop belonging to Kunti Devi's son.

Though women in a progressive place like Dehradun are educated yet they did not raise their voice against the exploitation of their natural resources. In sharp contrast to these educated women it was the illiterate women of Kheerakot who showed tremendous organisational ability and launched a stir against the mining operations in their village.

However, they remained undaunted and were not convinced when the contractor told them that he had obtained the contract from the government and the government could not be wrong. They firmly told him that under no circumstances would they allow him to carry on mining operations in the region.

It must be mentioned here that mining is fairly widespread in Uttarakhand and is not confined to Kheerakot along. There were agitations and protests against limestone quarrying between Dehradun and Mussoorie. Surprisingly, in the Doon Valley the agitation was launched by men and not by women. Though women in a progressive place like Dehradun are educated yet they did not raise their voice against the exploitation of their natural resources. In sharp contrast to these educated women it was the illiterate women of Kheerakot who showed tremendous organisational ability and launched a stir against the mining operations in their village. Their fearlessness and strength is indeed praiseworthy and deserves to be emulated by all women educated and uneducated alike.

While the women of Kheerakot were waging their relentless battle against mining operations, the contractor resorted to bribing the villagers but the villagers did not succumb to this. The women were firm in their resolve and told the contractor, "We want our forests, our fodder and our land. We neither want your money nor your fame." When the contractor realised that he could not sway them, he recruited Nepalese men and women from a neighbouring village and resumed the work. As soon as the women heard this, they rushed in large numbers to the mine and stopped all operations.

The courage and self-confidence which these women displayed is evidence of the fact that these women are truly emancipated. Not only are they conscious of their environment, but also have the ability to take decisions and action to save their environment. They are not lacking in any way; what is missing is encouragement and formal training.

Around this time the Collector paid an official visit to the village. The women met him and appraised him of the situation

in the village including the damage being done by the mining operations. After surveying the area, the Collector realised the extent of ecological damage and immediately gave orders to cancel the contractor's licence.

The year 1982 was a triumphant one for the women of Kheerakot—all mining operations were banned in the area. Their victory was proof of their organisational ability and strength. But they still had to wage another battle—that of undoing the harm done. They organised themselves to refill the ditches, construct walls around the fields and plant trees in the community forests. Their hard work paid rich dividends and within a couple of years the whole area had been afforested.

Inspired by the struggle of the women of Kheerakot, people of Pithoragarh and Siroli launched similar agitations to protect their natural wealth. The courage and self-confidence which these women displayed is evidence of the fact that these women are truly emancipated. Not only are they conscious of their environment, but also have the ability to take decisions and action to save their environment. They are not lacking in any way; what is missing is encouragement and formal training.

Today, these women have set up small industries to supplement their income. During the lean agricultural season in winters, they work in these industries. Their struggle has made them wiser and they have realised that the government will not come to their rescue. They have to rely on their own collective strength and efforts to protect their lives and their environment. Safeguarding their forest wealth is an ongoing struggle and the women have taken a vow to always protect their forests.

THE BOLD BRIDE

Veer-vadhu or the bold bride, a popular Garhwali song composed by Bhajan Sing, is based on a real life event. As the song reveals, *veer-vadhu* occupies a place no less than that of a warrior-queen. A symbol of courage and fearlessness, *veer-vadhu* or Devki, as she was known, has become a source of inspiration for all womankind. In the following narration, we will recount the life story of this bold bride.

In the "Rath" area of the Garhwal Himalayas lies a small village called Gweenth. As in other hilly areas, the women of Gweenth would perform various tasks such as farming, cattle rearing, collecting fuelwood, fodder and water in addition to their daily household chores. The young men of the village would either migrate to the towns and cities in search of work or would enlist in the army. Amar Singh was one such youth of the village. He was married to Devki from a neighbouring village. The young couple were happy together, free from the cares of the world. Around this time, in 1914 the First World War broke out in which Germany and France were engaged in a bitter battle. Amar Singh joined the Indian forces which were being sent to assist France in the war effort.

It is common knowledge that the young men of Garhwal who enlisted in the army always remembered one *mantra*; if they died fighting on the battlefield they would be assured of a place in heaven. If they survived and were victorious, their name would be immortalised in history and they would get more opportunities to serve their country. It is this idea which has inspired the youth of the region to enlist in the army in large numbers. Amar Singh was also inspired to join the army. He would regularly write to Devki to keep her informed of his whereabouts and the war.

In his absence, Devki busied herself taking care of her in-laws. She would regularly practice austerities like fasting and

pray to the gods for the well-being and long life of her husband. Hindu religion places great emphasis on fasting and other such austerities. Married women in particular practice these austerities for the welfare of their husbands.

Days passed by but Devki's thoughts were always with her husband and the war. She would think of the war and say to her friends, "Who knows what sort of problems my husband is facing on the front. I am living here comfortably whereas he has to put up with hardships." Her friends would try to console her. Devki had not heard from her husband for quite sometime and she was very upset. She would tell her friends, "My husband has not written to me. All his compatriots have returned home but there is no news from him" She would console herself with the thought that he was probably too busy to write to her.

Suddenly one day Devki received a telegram informing her that her husband had been killed in battle and had immortalised the name of Garhwal. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she read the telegram. She checked herself and reminded herself that her husband had done his duty towards his country. With this thought she wiped her tears and decided to live in a hut at a distance from the village. She continued to practice all kinds of austerities for her dead husband and spent her time serving the downtrodden and the poor.

She was a bold and courageous woman of the hills, ever ready to face any threat.

One day an Afghan from Kabul came to the village to sell asafetida to the villagers. He was ferocious looking, hefty, with a long beard and dressed in flowing robes. Seeing this fierce-looking man, the young children of the village fled in fear. He wanted to spend the night in the village but no one was

prepared to give him shelter for the night. He then approached Devki's hut and said to her, "Sister, please let me stay here for the night I will leave early in the morning." Simple-minded Devki thought that the good man only wanted shelter for the night so she let him sleep on the ground floor of the hut. She used to sleep in the room on the upper floor.

In the middle of the night when the entire village was asleep and there was an eerie silence all around, the *kabuli* went up the ladder and pushed the door of Devki's room and said menacingly, "If you want to live, open the door immediately". He was blinded by passion and wanted to outrage her modesty. In spite of the fact that she was alone, Devki did not lose hope and courage. She refused to open the door, whereupon the *kabuli* began to pound on he door. Since the door was not very sturdy, it soon broke down and Devki saw the man advancing towards her with a long knife in his hand. She shouted, "You mean rascal, listen to me and leave my house immediately. Why do you want to lose your life? You don't know you have woken up a sleeping tigress". The *kabuli* did not pay heed to her and continued to advance towards her.

Devki did not lose her presence of mind, she was a bold and courageous woman of the hills, ever ready to face any threat. She remembered her dead husband and picked up the *kukri* (dagger) lying on her pillow and charged upon the advancing Afghan like a wild tigress. She cut him into pieces. Splattered with blood, Devki looked like the fierce goddess Chandika out to kill the demons. Her face glowed with divine radiance. Flowing beside her was a stream of blood.

To save her honour this bold women of Garhwal killed the Afghan. She did not regret what she had done neither was she afraid of the consequences. She was proud of the fact that she had saved her honour single-handedly.

By morning the news had spread all over the village like wildfire. All the villagers collected at Devki's house and found her sitting unmoved by the episode. All the people praised her courage and even the court gave a verdict in her favour because she had only acted in self-defense to save her honour. The court said that she had done the right thing by killing the Afghan whose intentions were not noble. She had acted to save her honour. Hence, she could not be convicted of murder. The Afghan deserved to die because he had attempted to outrage the modesty of a young, lone widow. No courageous woman would tolerate an insult to her person. Brave Devki's name would be immortalised in the history of Garhwal as *veer-vadhu*. As a token of its appreciation the court honoured her with a reward of Rs. 500. It goes without saying that the existence of the universe depends on chaste and fearless women like Devki.

What Devki did is truly praiseworthy. Since time immemorial women's honour and dignity have been ravaged by wicked men like the Afghan. Courageous women like Devki use their intelligence and strength to put an end to their evil intentions.

Unfortunately, such outrages against women have been increasing in our society in recent years. This brave woman of Garhwal has provided a model of valour and intelligence for all women. Women must follow Devki's example and make use of their intelligence and strength to protect their dignity and honour. Acting in self-defense to save their honour is no crime. The need of the hour is for women to utilise their inner strength, courage and self-confidence and to realise that they are enlightened women.