MADHU SARIN

Some Insights Into Rural Women's Lives

—A Study Of Village Projects In Haryana

Often, rural welfare projects tend to ignore woman's interests. Here, a development worker describes the obstacles innate in womzns subordinate position in the family, which surfaced when she made an attempt to "integrate women" into a welfare project.

SUKHOMAJRI and Nada arejtwo villages in the Kalka *tehsil* of Ambala district, Haryana. From 1980 to 1983, I worked in these two villages under an experimental pro-ject on hill resource development. "The project started with ICAR funds and in 1980 received a Ford Foundation grant. I was employed by the Ford Foundation to work on the project from 1980. In 1983, I left the Foundation but continue to work in Nada village as a member of a four person team receiving funds from SIDA. We work together with other voluntary and government organisations.

Damaged Ecology

Sukhomajri and Nada are located next to the Shivalik hills. These hills have suffered severe denudation in the last four decades. The combined pressure of excessive grazing, firewood and building material needs of villagers, and illicit tree cutting for sale, has divested the hills of much of their green cover. The purpose of our project was to regreen the hills in cooperation with the villagers. Our assumption was that if villagers' interests were tied up with regreening of hills in such a way that villagers' economic status improved through regreening, they would cooperate. My role was mainly to ensure that women were not left out of decision making, and, at times, to point out where working with women would be more meaningful.

Under the project, a number of earthen dams were built in natural gullies in the hills, behind which rainwater was stored during the monsoons. Later, this water, which would otherwise cause further soil erosion and floods, could be used to irrigate villagers' fields.

The project aimed to ensure equitable distribution of benefits among all village households. To do this, water users' associations were formed. The first thing 1 attempted in Sukhomajri was to get the women to participate in villagers' meetings to finalise the rules of the association.

Young girls bringing heavy loads of fodder from the hills

Sukhomajri Village

Sukhomajri is a one caste village of gujjars. It has only about 70 families. Traditionally, gujjars are nomadic graziers. The gujjars of Sukhomajri, although no longer nomadic, continue to practise their traditional occupation of livestock farming as an important economic activity.

All the villagers are small and marginal farmers. Almost every family owns some land. The distri-bution of land is not very unequal.

Until some decades ago, the economy of the village was pre-carious, depending entirely on rain-fed agriculture and raising of goats. However, about 30 years ago, a cement factory was established at Surajpur, a few kilometres from the village. Today, at least one male from almost every family has regu-lar employment in the factory.

Since the men work at the factory, almost all responsibility for agriculture and livestock raising now rests on the women.

Women's Work Life

The women of Sukhomajri have to work extremely hard. They look after the animals. This means fetching water from the pond, fodder from nearby hills and fields, taking animals to the village pond to bathe, carrying the dung to the fields, making dungcakes and cleaning the cattle sheds.

Women also do hoeing, weeding, harvesting and postharvest processing of the crops. In addition, they take care of children, cooking and normal housework.

Despite all this work, women do not handle any cash. If there is any surplus grain or milk, men take it to market. Therefore, women are made to feel as if their contribution to the economy is worthless. Men reinforce this feeling by maintaining a casual, almost disparaging, atti-tude towards women's work.

Women's mobility is severely restricted. Young girls in parti-cular are not allowed to go out of the village, except in an emergency such as illness. In 1980, the village did not have a single literate female. A number of men had studied up to matriculation and boys were being sent to a school in the neighbouring village.

It was only after considerable persuasion by outsiders that some families began sending their little daughters to school.

Girls start contributing to the economy at a very early age. Girls aged six to seven are seen taking animals to graze or bathe, or even fetching fodder and fuelwood from the nearby hills. They also start helping their mothers with childcare and cooking. It seems that women are able to get some rest only if they have unmarried daughters.

The yearly cycle of crops and fodder collection is such that there are only about two months in the year, after the harvest in April, when women get some respite from their work burden. This time is spent on preparing for weddings. Some women make rugs for their own use or for their daughters' dowries.

Making dungcakes—a daily chore for women

Self View

The women's world view is extremely limited. Not surprisingly, they are afraid of the unknown out-side world. Most women are able to venture outside the village on their own only when middle age brings them some limited freedom. Long years of working like a beast of burden and rearing children respectably finally win them the men's permission to go to a nearby town to do essential shopping or to take sick people for medical care.

Many women never move out-side the limited geographical area of a few square kilometres in which their parents in-laws and a few close relatives live. These circumstances define women's self perception.

The subsistence economy, based on small holdings, complements the inadequate income from other sources. In this situation, women's role has become that of an indis-i pensable captive labour force. Their totally secluded lives filled with un-ending daily work give them little time or opportunity to reflect on their situation and consider changing it.

They see themselves as illiterate, helpless beings and say their lives are no better than those of the animals they tend. Yet, they see no means ot changing the situation.

Women At Meetings

When I first started going tc Sukhomajri, irrigation from th< dam near the village had just begun Until then, all outsiders involve* with the project had been men. M; arrival provided the women thei first close access to the decisio making process of the project. The were extremely curious about me.

On my first day in the villagi some girls eagerly took me to the homes. They showed me the beaut ful rugs they made. I also saw beautifully sculptured mud objects— shelves, cupboards and partition walls—expressions of their creativity.

When I asked the women what they thought of the dam, many con-flicts became apparent. Although happy to have a source of irrigation, some women said that they could not get water without bribing the government employee with a bottle of alcohol. One

woman complained bitterly that their land did not receive any water at all. She threatened to let her buffalos loose at the dam to damage it. Why should she not graze her cattle there when she got no benefit from it, she asked.

I realised that the project's aim to ensure equitable distribution of water to all families was far from being achieved. When I suggested that women should express their strong views at the next meeting of the water users' association, their immediate response was that the meetings were for the men, who know better. They felt that being illiterate, they, the women, under-stood little and could not make any contribution. When I pointed out that most of the men were - equally illiterate, they had no answer But it was clear that they perceived themselves as more illiterate than their illiterate husbands and sons.

After much effort, I managed to persuade some of the women to attend the next meeting of the association. They kept asking : "What is the use of our coming ? What will we do there ?" I told them they should simply say what they had told me of their problems with water distribution.

On the day of the meeting, 1 had to go round to every house, remind-ing the women of their promise to come to the meeting. Some men and children had started gathering in the compound where the meeting was to be held. Slowly, to my great delight, some women started show-ing up. But their absolute terror at the new experience surfaced immediately. They could not mus-ter the courage to walk past the few men who were standing near the compound entrance. Finally, I had to walk past this hurdle with them.

When they did enter the compound, the women sat huddled up in a corner, away from the men, with their heads covered. When the proceedings began, they refused to utter a single word. I tried my best to coax them into expressing their views but to no avail.

After sitting like that for a while, they started asking me whether they could now go home. The children were to be cooked for and fed and there was other work to be done. So they left the meeting, one by one. It became obvious to me that future meetings had to be fixed at a time when women were more free. The only problem was that there seemed to be no such time !

Women at a meeting — huddled up in a corner

I tried to get the women to attend two subsequent meetings. Each time, it took a lot of persuasion and effort and 1 had to go to each woman's house. Each time, a few women came, but sat huddled in a corner without uttering a word. I realised that years of subservience to men and of exclusion from non-family matters could not be undone so easily.

They perceived themselves as more illiterate than their illiterate husbands and sons

The Rug Venture

I started feeling that unless the women could somehow be made to participate in activities disconnected with their household life, and, particularly, if they could be made to earn cash incomes, there might be a change in their attitudes and their self perception.

With this in mind I started searching for a suitable activity. The only readily available thing was their rug making skill. These are *pan/a durries*. It takes a woman anywhere from 10 to 15 working days to produce one. The rugs have beautiful folk motifs and bright colours. I asked the women whether they would like to sell their rugs. The immediate response was : "Oh no. We don't sell them. These are only for our own use or for the use of our daughters after they get married !" It was as if even the thought of a woman wanting to sell something for money would be viewed as immoral.

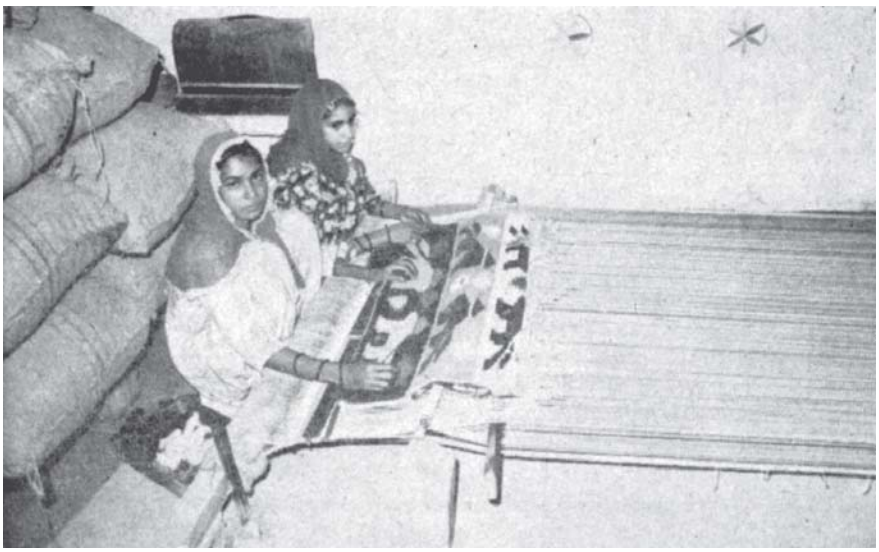
Even so, 1 tried to break through the barrier by tempting them with extremely attractive offers. An American visitor to the village showed interest in buying a rug. I calculated the cost of the raw materials and the labour input on the basis of the number of eight hour working days which went into producing it. This added up to a price of Rs 125 to Rs 150 per rug. The American visitor was quite willing to pay Rs 150.

The women found the offer too tempting to let go. The first person to succumb was a young woman called

Shanti* who had left her husband because he did no work. Shanti's rug was sold for Rs 150.

This created a furore in the neighbourhood. Other women started wanting me to get their rugs sold. I suggested that this was just a beginning and that if they were really interested in marketing their rugs they would have to proceed more systematically.

I started looking around for a more reliable• market for Sukhomajri's rugs. It became evident that the rugs could also have an export market, subject to certain quality control measures. To start with, the dyes would have to be permanent. The colours and designs might need to be tailored to the export market. The Small Industries and Handloom Corporation of Haryana showed willingness to market the rugs after setting up a training centre in Sukhomajri through which the quality control measures could be introduced.



Sukhomajri girls making a panja durry

I discussed the matter with the women. My preconditions for getting a training centre started and helping them with subsequent marketing were the following : i) that only women producers would be involved in the marketing ii) and that the women producers would form a cooperative to buy raw materials in bulk and to sell the rugs.

This meant that they had to give a prior commitment to accompany me during the initial exploratory stages of marketing. Once they had gained enough confidence and experience, they could do the work on their own.

However, the women just would not agree. They asked how they could go outside the village to deal with such matters when they were illiterate and knew nothing. I told them that I would be with them and help them with all the initial problems. But they would not even consider the proposition. They said their sons, their husbands, their brothers or their fathers would object.

Then one day, a village man came up to me and offered to supply me as many rugs as I wanted on a contract basis. He said that the price per rug would be lower than what had been paid so far and that he would only charge a commission on a per rug basis.

1 asked him how he could get so many rugs produced when the women had spare time only during two months of the year. His spontaneous reply was : "Oh, the women, don't do anything. They can produce as many rugs as necessary."

I immediately saw how this could end up making women's lives much worse than they are at present. Their men would start pressurising them to produce more rugs even though they are already overburdened with work. And the cash income would still be controlled by men. I dropped the idea like a hot brick.

A few days later, while talking to a village leader, Daulat Ram, I complained that the village women were not permitted to engage themselves in any activities outside the village. He came out with a telling reply. He said : "If the women get out of our control, how will we survive ?" *(Agar auraten hamare haath se nikal gayin to hamara guzara kaise chalega* ?)

He said : "If women get out of our control, how will we survive

The Chulha Experiment

In the meantime, an improved *chulha* (cooking stove) had been developed in the harijan section of Nada village. I tried to persuade some women in Sukhomajri to try it out. The new *chulha* offered the benefits of smoke removal from the kitchen, reduction in fuel consumption and the ability to cook two things at the same time, thereby saving cooking time.

A couple of women in Sukhomajri agreed to try the *chulha* aftei getting their husbands' permission to pay for it. Soon the *chulha* started spreading like an epidemic in thf village. Every woman I met seemec to want the chulha.

But, once again, the women's low self esteem became evident Their main motivation for adoptin the new chulha was not to save themselves from the bad effects of smoke or to reduce the time and effort they had to spend collecting fuel. Instead, they wanted to keep their kitchens clean so that the expense of whitewashing the kitchens could be minimised.

In retrospect, I also realise that the time when the new chulha was introduced in Sukhomajri had a lot to do with its sudden initial success. It was during the

months of February and March in 1981. The marriage season was about to begin after the harvest in April. Negotiations for marriages were going on in the villages.

In this context, the chulha became a status symbol even for the men. As one man remarked, outside parties coming with marriage pro-posals could be shown the new - chulha as a sign of the family's progressiveness. In this spirit, the men agreed to pay the Rs 25 to 30 that the chulha cost. The men could also see that the chulha might save on whitewashing expenditure.

By July, the initially popular chulhas were already in a mess. The : monsoons had arrived. Grass had started growing on the hills again. The women's brief holiday after the harvest was over. They had again started going to the hills to bring back heavy loads of grass for fodder. They made two such trips every day.

After returning with the first load around 10.30a.m., sweating profusely and tired, they had to sit next to the hot chulha to cook the morning meal. After attending to other work and having a brief rest, they were up and off again for the second headload of fodder.

Given this heavy workload, they could not find even the little time required to repair their chulhas. Chulha repair requires fetching good clay soil from the hills. They simply did not have any time to do this.

As a consequence, the originally beautiful chulhas were already in a bad state of disrepair. The chimneys remained uncleaned for weeks and smoke could not go out.

Disenchantment with the chulha had set in. The women complained that they did not know how to repair the new chulha properly. They found cleaning the chimney periodically a nuisance. This was not required with the traditional chulha.

Although the little extra effort yields tremendous benefits in terms of improved

Women's work—fetching fuelwood

health and comfort, the daily grind for women in Sukhomajri does not permit them such luxuries. When do they get the time to reflect on their own predicament and consider changing it?

Not Allowed To Earn

By this time, I had realised that proper construction and repair of the new chulha required considerable skill. The chulha was unlikely to survive for long in any village unless at least one or two local women acquired the necessary skill and were willing to go to others' houses to build new chulhas or repair old ones.

I searched desparately for some such women in Sukhomajri. The only candidates seemed to be a couple of young, unmarried girls, who had been quick learners and had helped me build the chulhas. When I suggested to them that they take care of construction of new chulhas, and repair of old ones, they looked at me in horror. How could they go to the houses of people living in other mohallas ?

I learnt that even in this small, compact village of only 70 odd families, there were six invisible neighbourhoods and movement of girls from one to the other is frowned upon. The girls said they would be scolded by their brothers or fathers. In any case, two of these three girls were married off within the next couple of months and they left the village. The third one was married off the following year.

Over the next two years, most of the chulhas survived but I won-dered how much this was due to the women's personal regard for me. Periodically, I would help them repair their chulhas. Off and on, requests for new chulhas also came, some from neighbouring villages.

But as no local woman had learnt the skill fully, and none was willing to take up the work of building chulhas, I knew that the Sukhomajri chulhas were not viable in the long run.

I have not been to the village for some time now. When I do go next, I will be surprised if more than two or three chulhas are still there.

"Successful" Project

As time went by, the irrigation system was extended to the other half of the village left out earlier. Agricultural and fodder production increased—in the fields due to irrigation and in the adjoining hills due to protection from grazing. The men started buying more and better quality buffalos. The women's workload continued to increase.

The successful project generated more money for men and more work for women

I managed to prevent the men from making women produce more rugs But I could not stop them from buying more buffalos. There is more fodder to be collected now and more animals to be looked after.

The village now sells several quintals of surplus milk but it is only the men who do the marke-ting. As the cash remains in men's hands, the consumption of alchohol in the village has increased. By normal indices, the project has been a "success" with so many more quintals of grain and milk production. But the women are even more difficult to find at home now than before. But 1 doubt if the women would prefer reverting to the earlier state when rhere was less work for them but greater financial insecurity for the family.

Under Severe Stress

In my early days at Sukhomajri, I had once taken a doctor friend along to attend to several medical complaints. For me, the most shocking discovery during this exercise was that several women in the village were regular consumers of tranquilisers. Some were actually addicted to them without being aware of it.

I had always assumed that psychological problems and nervous tension were largely urban phenomena. But the daily un-certainty about the next meal produces its own crop of nervous disorders amongst women of small and marginal farmer households. After all, it is the women who have to feed the children and experience their anguish if there isn't enough food in the house. Increased production of milk and food crops must have at least reduced such tensions for women, although at the cost of their having to do still more work.

One very positive byproduct of Sukhomajri women's contribution to the economy is that although they are kept strictly under con-trol by the men, they are not openly maltreated. During three years of working in the village, I did not come across a single case of wifebeating.

In fact, daughters of village households, whose marriages break down due to unreasonable behaviour by their husbands, are willingly accepted back by their parents. They are not forced to go back and "adjust" to their destiny.

The Case Of Shanti

Shanti was one such case. Shanti is the eldest of three sisters. Her pa-rents had jot her engaged when she was a little girl. Unfortunately, the boy, the eldest of seven brothers, grew into a good for nothing character. After Shanti was married to him, she found that he did no work at home or outside.

She tried to make up for her husband's uselessness by working hard on the family land and in the house. Instead of appreciating her efforts, he objected to her doing any work and quarrelled with her constantly. Fed up with him, she returned to her parenls in Sukhomajri. She gave birth to a son a few months later.

Shanti's parents accepted her back without a fuss. They felt that she had a legitimate reason foi leaving her unreasonable husband. She gracefully fitted back into her role as the eldest daughter and was treated with respect.

Shanti's husband kept sending messages to her to return. She went back to him once or twice but he did not change his ways. Once, when she was back in Sukhomajri, her husband came there himself and threatened to take her back by force. What was remarkable was that the men of the whole village got together to defend Shanti, They warned her husband not to dare come to the village again or try using any violent means to take Shanti back.

One positive byproduct of Sukhomajri women's contribution to the economy is that women whose marriages break down are accepted back by their parents

During all my efforts to try and get at least one or two women in Sukhomajri to explore taking up a nontraditional occupation, I had tried to get Shanti to take a lead. Although her parents treated her well and with respect (maybe because she had produced a son) she was worried about her long term future. But even Shanti could not muster enough courage. Given an upbringing of total dependence on men, she did not have the courage to risk incurring her father's displeasure by doing something unconventional. Her personal insecuiity led to this attitude. As her husband was unreliable she could hardly afford to lose

A beautifully decorated chulha in Sukhomajri

the security of the protection of her father, the other man in her life. What was amazing was that she wasn't even willing to consult her father on the subject, just in case he disapproved. Maybe he would not have done so.

Other Duties

While working in Sukhomajri, I also learnt that in an adjoining village it was still a common practice for only the eldest son of a family to be married. The younger brothers remain unmar-ried to prevent the family's land holding from being subdivided The wife of the eldest brother is expected to "satisfy" the sexual needs of the younger brothers too. I had only heard this second hand as I had never been to the other village.

One day, while sitting with Shanti in her parents' house, I realised that the practice was prevalent at least to some extent in Sukhomajri also. Their neighbour Kammo was preparing for the wedding of her second son and complaining bitterly about the noncooperative attitude of her elder daughter-in-Jaw. She was saying that all the addi-tional expense of another wedding could have been avoided if her elder daughter-in-law had coopera-ted. I suddenly realised that Kammo was complaining about her elder daughter-in-law refusing to "oblige" her other sons.

Bina of Sukhomajri learns to saw cement pipes with ease

I asked Shanti whether she had experienced similar pressures from her in-laws as her husband had six younger brothers. She said she had not. But she said that it was really up to the woman. Had she shown her willingness it would have been happily accepted and no eyebrows would have been raised. At least, women are given an option in the matter. ❐

***Manushi** No. 36 will carry the second instalment of this article, describing the experiments in Nada.

Women Help Each Other

In Manushi No. 31, we reported on a women's camp in Rewa and the emergence of a women's group there. In June 1986, a member of Samta Sangathan, a local social organisation, came and told us the story of a case taken up by the women's group.

One night, Hamidan Bano, the founder of the women's group, came to know that Rani Nandwani, a 35 year old widow, along with her five year old son, had been thrown out of her in-laws' house and had been living under a tree for two nights. Hamidan brought Rani to her house and kept her there.

Rani's husband, Sheetal Sindhi, had died under mysterious circums-tances in 1984. In April 1985, Rani's father-in-law, Adatmal, lodged a report with the Rewa police, stating that Rani was mentally sick and frequently attempted suicide. Then began the systematic torture of Rani by her in-laws.

She and her son were imprisoned in a room and denied food, water or clothing. She was manhandled, stripped and tortured, pins being inserted under her nails. She was forced to promise that she would not claim her husband's property. Her in-laws threatened to kill her if she told anyone about all this. They wanted to coerce her into writing a note that she was leaving the house voluntarily. Finally, they threw her out of the house.

Rani and Himidan Bano

Hamidan Bano and other activi-sts met the police and helped Rani register a report against her in-laws. The medical examination was conducted too late to provide evidence of all the tortures she had undergone. However, on the basis of this report and her statement, her parents-in-law were arrested. The case was highlighted in the press.

Rani, a matriculate, is skilled in many areas, and is a bright, lively woman who has been rendered weak and distraught by her ordeal. How-ever, she does not suffer from any mental illness. Rani has now retur-ned to her natal family in their village. She intends to fight for her right to her husband's property.