

Eager to Move Towards Freedom

—The Women of Harijan Nada

*This is the second part of a study by a development worker, of two village development projects in Haryana. The first part, in **Manushi** No. 35, described the difficulties of trying to integrate women's interests into the project in Sukhomajri. Here, she describes the somewhat more positive situation for women in the neighbouring harijan village, Nada, where she continues to work on her own, without funding.*

NADA is only 12 kilometres from Chandigarh and the distance between Sukhomajri and Nada is 16 kilometres. It is unclear whether the village got its name from the famous *gurudwara* of Nada Sahib near it or vice versa. But, unlike Sukhomajri, Nada is a two caste village of harijans (chamars) and lavanas, a caste somewhere in the middle of the caste hierarchy. Like the gujjars of Sukhomajri, lavanas practise livestock farming and agriculture on small and marginal landholdings. Out of 115 households in the village, only 18 are harijans and the rest lavanas.

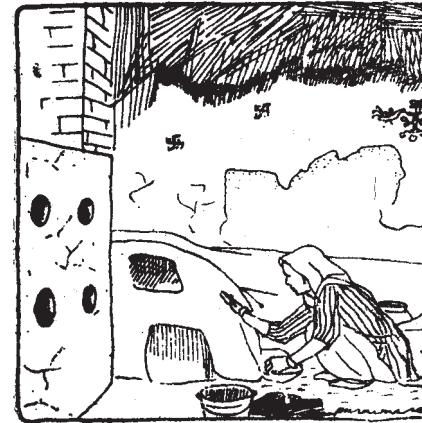
Unlike Sukhomajri, Nada is not a compact village. It consists of five fairly separate hamlets. Upper Nada, middle Nada and lower Nada are inhabited by the lavanas. The harijans live in a separate hamlet on the other side of a dry riverbed which floods during the monsoon and which divides the village into two parts. The fifth hamlet consists of new settlers permitted by the headman to live in the village.

When I started working on the project to regreen the hills, three dams were under construction in Nada—two for the lavanas and one for the harijans. The villagers feared that the earthen dams might break down and flood their village.

Mr P. R. Mishra, officer in charge of the Central Soil and Water Conservation

Training and Research Institute in Chandigarh, was the real godfather of the project. His reason for selecting rope production was to link it up with rehabilitation of the denuded hill near the hamlet. He assumed that if people started earning an attractive income from rope, they could be motivated to protect a plantation of their raw material, namely, *bhabbar* grass, on the hillside. Before I joined, he had tried persuading the harijan Nada men to start rope production. They showed little interest. After I joined, he asked me whether I could try the same. I found his basic argument sound and attractive. After my first few visits to Nada, I told him that the men could not afford the risk of experimenting with a new vocation as they were the sole breadwinners. Who would feed the family while they tried a new thing? On the other hand, the women had both the time and the inclination. He agreed to provide me all support in getting the women started. That is how the rope production venture began.

A basic assumption of the experimental project in both Sukhomajri and Nada was that if we could somehow tie up *all* villagers' interests with regreening the hills, they would cooperate. This included men and women. My role was mainly to ensure that women were not left out of the



Purnima

decision making processes and at times to pinpoint where working with women would be more meaningful.

Unlike Sukhomajri, where the project had started some years ago, very little work had yet been done in Nada. I had to establish a relationship with the villagers from scratch. I started by visiting Nada's different hamlets and trying to talk to the women there. I explained the objectives of the project to them and asked for basic information about land holding and livestock ownership patterns so as to work out the irrigation and fodder needs of the village. Most of the men were out during the morning.

The women of upper and middle Nada seemed suspicious. They were reluctant and afraid to give any information to an outsider in the absence of the men. Much like the women of Sukhomajri, the lavana women of Nada said that, being illiterate, they could not answer my questions. They wanted me to come later in the day when the men would be back.

Harijan Nada

The response of the harijan community, on the other hand, was totally different. On my very first visit to their hamlet, the men, women and children happily gave me all the information I asked for in great detail. It was evident that due to their poverty

and ownership of very limited assets in terms of land, animals and household goods, they had nothing to fear from an outsider and nothing to hide.

Of the 18 households in harijan Nada, five are completely landless. Eight households have very small landholdings of less than a quarter acre each. Only five families own about half an acre each. The total agricultural land in the hamlet is only two hectares. Of this, more than one fourth has been bought by the higher caste *sarpanch* of middle Nada.

Most of the harijan men work on daily wages. Two or three young men have salaried employment in nearby establishments. An extraordinary thing about harijan Nada is that it has a much higher level of literacy than either Sukhomajri or the lavana hamlets. One young man has obtained a PhD. in Sanskrit. Another man has obtained a diploma in civil engineering. Other teenage boys go to high school in the nearby township of Panchkula.

Most of the young girls also attend the primary school in the village. The only difference between boys and girls in schooling is that after finishing primary school, girls are not sent to the high school in Panchkula. The parents consider it unsafe for the girls to walk to a school two kilometres away from the hamlet.

Women Of Harijan Nada

The women of harijan Nada, unlike their counterparts in Sukhomajri, and the higher caste lavanas in Nada, are not overburdened with work and their families own little land and few animals. Because of this, the women showed tremendous interest in being provided with some employment opportunities. Their only condition was that they should be able to work in the village itself and not have to go out to work.

It seemed that, although less than in Sukhomajri, the attitude towards women going out to work was equally negative in harijan Nada. Despite conditions of acute hardship, the women had never considered going out to work on daily wages like the men. But they had



Women's work — harvesting and processing the maize crop

absolutely no hesitation about working at home to earn additional income for their families.

Rope Production

To start with, Mr Mishra and I tried to get the women of harijan Nada to make rope from a local species of grass called *bhabbar*. Two footpedal operated rope making machines and some *bhabbar* were taken to the hamlet. Six women had shown interest in learning how to make rope. They were shown how to use the machines and the two machines were left in the hamlet for the women to practise on.

Unfortunately, one of the machines never worked properly. There were also many problems in the women sharing the other machine. Ultimately, only one woman, Radha* was asked to keep producing rope on this machine and to explore marketing possibilities in surrounding areas. It was decided that more machines would be brought for the other women only if the economic viability of the venture could first be established through Radha.

Radha, although totally illiterate, is one of the most enterprising and intelligent women in harijan Nada. She is a quick learner and very progressive in her attitudes. She has two daughters and three sons. Two of the latter are twins. After her youngest son was born, she

decided enough was enough. One day, she disappeared from the house. Her husband finally traced her in the primary health centre at Pinjore where she had got a tubectomy operation performed on herself. She was the first woman in the hamlet to take this initiative. Today, many others have followed suit. She is also fortunate in having a very supportive husband. He works as a mason in nearby villages.

Radha started working on the machine regularly. She and her husband also started looking around for a market for the rope. In the beginning, they had many problems. The shopkeepers in Panchkula were willing to pay them only Rs 1.25 per kilo when they themselves sold it for Rs 2.20 to Rs 2.50. But Radha and her husband were not easily demoralised. Both of them have a lot of contacts in the high caste village. They realised that if they could sell their rope directly to the villagers, they could get a much better price. Within three to four months of trying out various alternatives, Radha and her husband managed to find reliable outlets for their rope at a reasonably attractive price.

Seeing Radha earn up to Rs 10 a day by spending her spare time on the

* Names of the villagers have been changed to protect their identity.

machine, other women also started asking for machines. One of these women was Bala. Earlier, Bala had said that since she had small children, she would not be able to produce rope. When asked why she was asking for a machine now, Bala said she had been watching Radha earn money by her own labour. She felt that this had increased Radha's self respect and independent decision making powers. Although she would not find too much time to work on the rope machine, Bala felt that she could produce some rope to earn at least some independent income. That would enable her to pay for her improved *chulha* which she had decided to adopt on her own. She would no longer need constantly to beg her husband for money and that would also increase the respect she got from him. She felt that women should have some dignity of their own and not have to be totally dependent on their husbands.

This way, the number of rope machines in harijan Nada increased to nine. As the hamlet's rope production increased, new marketing problems came up. The poorer women were sometimes forced to undercut the others by selling their rope at a cheaper price because they urgently needed money. This led to some conflicts among the women rope producers. I tried to find a collective solution to the problem by calling a meeting of all the women rope producers. At this meeting, we discussed the legitimate need of very poor women for cash during emergencies and the legitimate grievance of other producers at rope being sold at too low a price. On my suggestion, the women agreed to deposit their rope in a common pool against which they could get some advance payment. This way some women's urgent need for money could be taken care of. It was decided that when enough stocks had accumulated, all the rope would be transported to a further market where a better price might be available.

Marketing rope outside the village meant that the women had to agree to accompany me on these exploratory missions. Unlike the women of

Sukhomajri, the women of harijan Nada readily agreed to this. They did not seem to need prior permission from their husbands.

However, it soon became clear that even the women of harijan Nada could not attain freedom of mobility so easily. Some people in the hamlet started a whispering slander campaign against the women producers. They started insinuating that the women's trips to Chandigarh and other places for selling rope were really a guise for other undesirable activities. But, unlike the women of Sukhomajri, the women of harijan Nada stuck to their guns. They said that some people of this type were always around and that they should simply be ignored. It appeared that poverty, and a strong determination to step out of it, made the harijan Nada women effectively more free compared to the materially better off women of Sukhomajri.

During all this time, I also carefully monitored how the women were using their newly acquired cash income. I was afraid that as in Sukhomajri, the men in Nada might be pocketing the money earned by the women. But the women rope producers were keeping complete control on their incomes. Their priorities for using this money included buying

school uniforms and exercise books for their children, quilts to keep the family warm in winter, utensils and clothing for themselves.

The only woman who had problems in keeping control on her income was Kamla. Her old husband, Ramu, besides openly complaining about her going out to sell the rope, wanted to pocket all the money himself. Kamla tried her best to fight against this. She succeeded to some extent but not always. For example, sometimes, Ramu would simply pick some of her rope and go and sell it himself. He never gave any money back to the family. However, out of the money which Kamla was able to keep herself, she soon bought new clothing for herself and her young daughters. For once, they no longer were in rags.

On the whole, the women's rope production definitely started new dynamics in interpersonal relationships within some families. The women producers became more selfconfident and assertive in their own homes. Their status in the community also increased. They were quite disciplined in paying for the raw material and machines in small instalments.

Today, about five of the nine machines in Nada are still working. The other four are temporarily out of use,



Working at her rope machine

either due to illness in the family or because the women concerned have got very small children who do not permit them to work. The original marketing problems are totally solved.

With the systematic and persistent efforts of women like Radha, today, the rope production of harijan Nada is not enough to meet the demand for it. People from the main village and neighbouring villages come and buy the rope directly from the producers. As a consequence, the middleman's profit is avoided and both producers and consumers benefit from the bargain.

Social Forestry

Once rope production got established, the villagers' views were sought on planting the hillsides. Three species were selected—*bhabbar* grass as raw material for rope, *soo babul* for fodder and *prosopis* for fuel.

Unlike in Sukhomajri, the women played an active role in village meetings called for the purpose. Also, when the Harijan Nada Water Users' Association was formed, the villagers on their own elected two women as members of its governing body. Radha was one of them. She took an active interest in the affairs of the association and would not hesitate to articulate problems as they came up.

Because of women's participation in the planning of the social forestry project in harijan Nada, the villagers agreed completely to stop grazing their cattle in the plantation area. This was remarkable as this area had been their traditional grazing ground for generations.

The social forestry project today is visible by its success. Surrounded by a still brown and denuded hillside the project area is like an oasis in the desert. Due to grazing being stopped, the growth of wild grass in the area has increased substantially. Now, the women of harijan Nada have to spend much less time and effort in collecting fodder.

We got the men's cooperation by providing them employment in the project. Most of the project costs were on labour and most of the money went

to the villagers. Having slaved on digging and planting the hillside, they were more responsive to seeing the plantation being a success.

Further, in Sukhomajri and Nada, men tend to collect fuelwood while women collect fodder. Some men also collect fodder. So it was in the interest of both to protect the plantation. Also, although rope production was primarily initiated by women, some of the men also work on the machines on days when they can't get hired as field labour. So, again, they have an interest in protecting their raw material for rope. Perhaps most important of all, due to their greater poverty, relationships between men and women in harijan Nada are more supportive. I expect it is necessary for survival. As far as increased income from milk is concerned, that doesn't apply to harijan Nada. The people there have too few animals and all the hamlet's milk production is consumed in the hamlet itself.

I think another reason for the project's success was the fairly democratic and collective decision making process which went with it. We organised several meetings with the villagers, particularly when any conflict surfaced.

Of course, there are still several unresolved problems. The higher caste villagers resent the harijans' getting this new benefit and might destroy it if constant watch is not maintained. Once, there was a terrible fight between the higher caste and harijan women as the latter came and cut all the grass in two days. The harijans' legal rights to the produce have still not been formalised.

Women As Masons

Development of the now fairly well known improved Nada *chulha* started in Kamla's small kitchen in harijan Nada. Despite belonging to one of the poorest families in the hamlet, Kamla had a great desire to improve the quality of her life. It is only because she was herself trying to find ways of removing smoke from her kitchen that development of the improved *chulha* got going.

As the *chulha* started becoming popular in other areas, Radha, Kamla,

Shanti and Lajo readily agreed to take up the new vocation of skilled *chulha* masons to meet this demand. They accompanied me to far off places like Rishikesh, Garhwal, Allahabad, Himachal, Delhi and Hissar to train workers of other organisations.

Travelling with them was like travelling with grown up children. They had never travelled so far from their village before. Some of them had never been in a train or even in a bus. Their reactions to new sights and experiences were fresh and childlike. They observed minute details of the new environments they visited.

However, once this travelling began, I realised that only the older women were able to come out with me. Young girls, just like the girls in Sukhomajri, were permitted no mobility. When the *chulha* was still being developed, I noticed that a bright, teenaged girl named Meenu, who had five years of schooling, had got so interested in the *chulha* that she had drawn excellent plans of all the *chulhas* built in the hamlet. She had also made a beautiful little model of the new *chulha*.

Thinking that with her interest and intelligence she would make a very good *chulha* mason, and, because she came from a poor landless family, her income from the work would be valued, I started encouraging her to come with us to build *chulhas* in other villages. Meenu felt excited about this. One day, she accompanied us to a nearby village to build a *chulha* for her neighbours' relative. Unfortunately, when she returned home in the evening, despite Meenu's having gone with two older women, her father beat her ruthlessly. He told her that she was never to go out like that again. His main worry was that if Meenu attained a reputation of being independent and mobile, she would become unmarriageable. He did not want the burden of a daughter who could not be easily married off.

The irony was that even the daughters of the older women *chulha* masons were in a similar predicament. In fact, as mothers, these women could get away from their houses only because

they had their teenaged daughters at home to do all the work. These young girls took care of all the cooking, of their younger brothers and sisters, of the animals, and fetched water from the community tap. As soon as the girls started being married off, the mobility of their mothers became severely restricted.

The case of Shanti's daughter, Anguri, was tragic. Anguri was an extremely beautiful teenaged girl. She was barely 15 years old when her parents started being pressurised by her future in-laws to solemnise the marriage quickly. Shanti was not keen to marry off Anguri so soon. However, she felt insecure about losing a match for her daughter in case she did not comply. She succumbed to the pressure. Poor Anguri was married off at the young age of 15. With Shanti's own family's precarious economic condition, they did not have the freedom to choose between many matches for their daughter. Perhaps they did not look hard enough.

As it was, straight after her marriage, Anguri started being used like a beast of burden by her in-laws. On top of that, her husband turned out to be mentally unbalanced. He did not provide Anguri any support against his parents' demands. Within nine months, pale and anaemic, Anguri gave birth to her first child. Soon after this, she was expected to work from early morning till late at night. Within the next year, she had another child. Her health got worse than before.

Shanti and her husband tried protesting to Anguri's in-laws against the way they were treating her. At one stage, Anguri even came back to her parents. Her husband got so upset by this that he poured kerosene on himself and set himself on fire. He had to stay in hospital for a couple of months before he could move around again.

During this period Anguri stayed with her parents. Shanti and her husband, much as they loved their daughter, started feeling that they could not support her and her two children for ever. Anguri herself started feeling that she could not remain a burden on her

parents. Finally, she herself decided that she should go back to her "destiny". This traumatic experience made Shanti have several nervous breakdowns. But the compulsions of poverty are such that she felt that Anguri might as well go back.

Kamla's attitude towards her daughter was the same. Kamla has five daughters and two sons. Three of the daughters and one son were already married and had their own children.

As far as the older women *chulha* masons were concerned, most of them encountered few problems from their families. Radha's husband actively promoted Radha's *chulha* work by telling the families whose houses he built as a mason, to adopt the new *chulha*. His only objection to Radha's going out for several days was that he missed her a lot. He told her that he did not feel like returning home when she was not there. In fact, eventually, Radha's mobility got



Selling rope at a consumers' forum sale, Chandigarh

Kamla's fourth daughter, Janaki, was a teenager and also a very attractive girl. She did a lot of work in the house and took care of the animals. But she did not keep good health. With Ramu being uncooperative and not giving any money to the family, Kamla found it extremely difficult to pay for Janaki's medicines and treatment. It was heartbreakingly to see how Kamla would talk to others about Janaki in her presence. She would talk of her inability to pay for the girl's treatment and that she didn't know what to do with the liability. She also complained bitterly when, due to her sickness, Janaki could not do much housework. In her own predicament of poverty, Kamla found her teenaged daughter a liability and did not hesitate to say so in front of the poor girl.

restricted only because both her daughters were married off and there was no one left to attend to the animals in her absence.

Shanti's husband as well as teenaged sons actively encouraged her to go out to work, but Shanti suffers from nervous tension and does not have the courage to move around alone. She hates spending nights away from home. Once, she agreed to come on a two day trip after a lot of persuasion. But she had a nervous breakdown on the first evening and had us running around looking for tranquilisers. Because of this, she has not been very active.

Lajo's husband and sons gave her their wholehearted support. In fact, for a while, two of her sons also worked as *chulha* masons.

It was only Kamla who had to fight a



One of the women chulha masons

hard battle with her husband. She finally lost it as described in her profile.

Kamla's Life

To understand Kamla's attitudes, one needs to look at her personal history. Her father was a railway employee with a secure income and a reasonable standard of living. Kamla spent her unmarried life in an urban setting. She recalls that life before marriage was much more comfortable.

For some unknown reason, her father married Kamla and her sister Rani, to two totally landless brothers in harijan Nada. For the two sisters, marriage amounted not only to a steep decline in economic standards but also having to switch from urban to rural life. Kamla found the change traumatic and difficult. A few times she remarked that their father had dumped his two daughters like rubbish in a rubbish bin.

To make matters worse, Kamla's husband Ramu turned out to be a suspicious and obstinate man. In her youth, Kamla must have been a very attractive woman. Perhaps Ramu suspected her fidelity because of this. Perhaps their relationship never found a stable footing due to Kamla's open

contempt for Ramu. Ramu could not provide her with a standard of living equivalent to her father's. Both husband and wife quarrelled frequently from the beginning. Kamla feels a sense of bitterness at the lot of women. Ramu's daily actions reinforce this all the time.

Kamla and Ramu produced six daughters and two sons. They gave away one daughter to Rani and her husband as those two had no children. Today, only the youngest daughter is unmarried. Kamla now must be at least 55 years old. Ramu looks much older.

All through her difficult married life, Kamla continued to create whatever dignity she could in her living environment. As, financially the family lived from hand to mouth, she could only use non-monetary means to do this. Her mud hut is maintained immaculately. Kamla is an artist as far as working with mud is concerned. She can create beautiful sculptured forms with mud and prides herself on the quality of whatever she does.

When she started making rope, she put in a lot more labour into each kilogram than, say, Radha. She wanted even her rope to be of the best possible standard. It was a pity that the rope customers were unwilling to

pay more for it as they did not require such fine quality. It was the same with *chulhas*. Kamla can spend hours giving finishing touches to a *chulha* she builds until it looks like a piece of art. She gets immense satisfaction from doing that. But again, people pay labour charges on a per *chulha* basis and not according to its quality. This makes Kamla feel cheated.

When Kamla started working on both rope production and *chulha* making, to start with, Ramu seemed quite happy about the extra income this would bring. However, when Kamla asserted her right to control her independently earned income, he started protesting. He wanted her to produce the rope but to market it himself and keep the money. Kamla refused to oblige as she never saw the money again.

Ramu started picking up her rope and selling it on the sly. He also started objecting to her going out to either sell the rope or to make *chulhas*. He started accusing her of having illicit relations with men outside the village.

Kamla refused to stop working. For the first time since her marriage, she had found an opportunity to earn some money to complement Ramu's meagre wages. All her grown up children supported her decision to continue working and to ignore Ramu's increasingly unreasonable outbursts.

This continued for two years. Ramu's attacks became very bad. He reached the point where he started accusing Kamla of having relations with their elder son simply because the son was supporting Kamla's decision to keep working.

Finally, matters reached a head. Once, when Kamla had come on a two day trip to Garhwal, Ramu made life totally unbearable for the rest of the family. He went on a rampage, breaking things and showering abuses on everyone. This time the children could not take it.

They requested Kamla not to go out to work so as to stop Ramu from making life miserable for everyone. Poor Kamla decided to give in.

Women's Needs—Last Priority

When the *chulha* work started, I decided that every *chulha* owner should pay the full cost of materials. I wanted to be sure that the women were really interested in the new *chulha* and that it was really providing them some benefits.

One day a woman called Panna from upper Nada came and asked me if it was possible to reduce the cost of the *chulha*. I asked her why. She said she was very keen on the *chulha* as with it the pots didn't get blackened so much. She found

balance in a few days time. Many days went by and Meeto still hadn't paid the balance. While checking on how the *chulhas* were working, I went to Meeto's house also. Her husband was at home. She and her husband expressed full satisfaction with the *chulha*. When I reminded her of the unpaid balance of Rs 25, she started making facial gestures at me to shut up. Her husband immediately started asking how much the *chulha* cost. I then realised that Meeto had made an independent decision to get the *chulha* and had told her husband that it was going to cost much less than what it actually cost. She knew that her husband would not agree to pay the full cost. She was trying to raise the balance

as it was, even well off families were reluctant to dish out the small amount necessary for the *chulha* as they were used to getting free things from government and expected the harijans to provide them free labour. However, they agreed that many women, although willing to pay, were unable to persuade their husbands to dish out the money. It would be worth thinking of ways to make the *chulha* accessible to more women.

We decided that if we reduced the price to half, more women should feel able to demand that their husbands pay. Their husbands' agreeing would help them assert themselves to a greater extent in other matters. Once the men agreed to pay for something that mainly benefits women, a new focus could be placed on women's needs. It could become a means of empowering women to start demanding a greater say in matters affecting their lives. With regard to the *chulha* itself, once the family had got used to the new *chulha*, it would be easier for women to demand its replacement, when required, at a later date, even if no subsidy was available. Therefore, we decided to introduce a 50 percent subsidy for the *chulha*.

Unfortunately, in late 1983, the Department of Nonconventional Energy Sources (DNES) started introducing such improved *chulhas* on a 100 percent subsidy basis all over the country. Word about free *chulhas* spread fast even in Nada and neighbouring villages. New *chulha* clients started expecting women like Kamla and Radha to provide them free *chulhas*. We stuck to our stand of not building *chulhas* for less than half the actual price. Demand for Radha's and Kamla's services declined.

The DNES programme ended up shifting the focus from women to men as decision makers in adopting the new *chulhas*. The men could see the benefit of getting 10 feet long free asbestos cement pipes for *chulhas* which they could later use for drainage or irrigation. I have tried to point this out to DNES but it is difficult to make bureaucracies respond to such considerations. □



Cooking on the chulha she has made in the beautiful kitchen she has designed

scrubbing dirty pots quite painful and time consuming. However, her husband refused to pay for the *chulha*. His argument was that when the family's food could be cooked on the traditional *chulha* which cost nothing, where was the need to spend Rs 40 on a new type of *chulha*. We finally worked out a method by which Panna got a *chulha* at a lesser cost.

Then there was the case of Meeto Panna's neighbour in upper Nada. Meeto asked Radha to build a *chulha* for her. She paid Rs 15 on the day of the construction and said she would pay the

without his finding out.

From these types of cases, it started becoming clearer that there were probably several women who wanted to adopt the *chulha* but never asked for it because the husbands would refuse to pay for it. After all the men control the money and the benefits go mainly to the woman. Given women's low status, why should the men pay?

I discussed the matter with Radha and Kamla. They strongly felt that *chulhas* should not be provided totally free or at too low a price as that would affect their status as *chulha* masons. They said that