

“If Nobody Fights, We Will”

Rope Makers of Ghar

An account of women's role in the hill people's movement for access to the forests



Sue Darlow (Photo of a Gujarati tribal ropemaker)

GHAR, at the foothills of the Shivaliks in Saharanpur district, Uttar Pradesh, is an area about 65 km long and 10 km wide and is one of the most backward areas in western Uttar Pradesh. Hill rivers flow there only when it rains, and their irregular course results in heavy soil erosion. In summer, forest fires are numerous.

Ghar is populated mainly by landless Harijans, Banjaras and poor Muslims, who today face not only the natural calamities of flash floods and fires but the indifference of the

administration to their traditional right of cutting the wild *bhabbar* grass that grows in the forests. Over the years, a unique relationship involving both protection and dependence evolved between the people and their immediate environment—the forest. While they battled forest fires and rebuilt their villages after floods, they used the resources of the forest for fuel and medicine and wove the *bhabbar* grass into fine quality *baan* rope which is sold at biweekly markets to traders who distribute it all over

the country for the making of string beds, stools and nets. About 40,000 families are involved in the traditional rural industry of cutting and producing *baan* rope.

Before the establishment of British rule, the people of the area had natural access to the raw material, the wild *bhabbar* grass. The British formulated the Forest Act which, while creating restrictions on tree access, allowed the local population some access for their daily needs.

In 1962, the paper mills were given

rights over the grass for the making of pulp. They allowed the local population to cut seven headloads per month for their livelihood. Subsequently, the forest department brought in contractors to cut and sell the grass both to the producers of the rope as well as to the paper mills. These contractors were instructed to supply about 40 percent of the grass at subsidised rates to the paper mills. The rest was to be sold at a price decided by the contractors.

The working plan of the Shivalik Division for 1979-1989 recognises the traditional rights of the people over the raw materials, fuel and fodder provided by the forest. But the forest department and, since 1982, the forest corporation, have, through their continued association with vested interests, conspired to deprive the people of these rights.

The mathematics of the entire exercise reveals the true picture of exploitation being perpetrated by the government of Uttar Pradesh in league with the contractors. When in 1962, the forest was given over to, the contractors, each head of family in 36 villages had 21 days' cutting rights over the forest. This was subsequently curbed and later denied. Had each person brought 40kg (a headload) per day this would have worked out to 30,000 quintals, presuming that 100 from each village went to work.

With the present rate of sale by the forest corporation being Rs 150 per quintal, the earning, which could have gone to the villagers, works out to Rs 45 lakhs, of which the major share now goes to the corporation, the forest department and the contractor. The corporation claims that its expenses are Rs 55 per quintal of which Rs 38 go to the contractor and Rs 17 on overheads, Rs 45 goes to the forest department as royalty while the remaining Rs 50 is the profit taken by the corporation. In other

words, both the forest department and the forest corporation in the same government draw profit from the very same item.

Of the Rs 38 per quintal paid to the contractor he pays Rs 18 to the labourer who takes two days to cut a quintal of grass, thus getting Rs 9 a day. Even this payment to the worker is not made directly. Part payments are made and no accounts are kept until the entire amount is weighed,

which sometimes takes a month. A part of the payment is made as "expenses" and later "adjusted", and ration is provided for the cutters at rates 50 percent higher than normal. These cutters are treated as bonded labour and consist mostly of Gorkha labour provided by Nepali contractors who move them from forest to forest with no permanent dwelling place.

It is ironical that while the annual progress report of the forest



Working the Bhabbar grass into rope in Shivalik

corporation mentions in its objectives that the contract system should be abolished, the forest corporation not only leases its forests to contractors but performs the role of a contractor itself.

The pricing of the grass reveals another interesting fact. The forest corporation supplies grass to the paper mill at Rs 40 per quintal, calling it wastage, whereas the cutting costs the same. A product can only be termed wastage if it is a by-product subsequent to processing and should by no means be called wastage at cutting time.

The corporation claims that by supplying the grass at Rs 40 (this rate is fixed at higher levels in government, obviously due to political influence), they suffer a loss of Rs 60 per quintal which they make up by selling the grass to the *baan* rope producers at Rs 150 per quintal. As a result, the deficit created by subsidies to the paper mills is borne by the poor producer who should get the grass at the actual cost of Rs 55 per quintal.

While Rs 150 is the wholesale price, the retail price at which it is sold in the villages by middlemen is Rs 200 per quintal. When a family works on the production of *baan* rope, a quintal yields about 70 kg of rope which is sold for Rs 250. The real earning therefore, is Rs 50 per quintal for the two quintal a month that they are able to produce. The earning per family is therefore only Rs 100 per month.

The local people are now struggling for access to the forest as is their traditional right so that they can earn at least Rs 300 per month. Men and women of the area united to form the Ghar Kshetra Mazdoor Morcha and formulated three demands: restoration of traditional rights of the people to forest produce, removal of contractors from the forest; and fixing of a retail price for *bhabbar* grass based on actual cost and expenditure. Since there was no

response from either the district authorities or the forest department, the Morcha decided to launch a movement.

On October 1, 1986, at a conference attended by 6,000 members, a decision was taken to enter the forest in December and cut the grass as was their traditional practice. The public announcement was met with complete silence until November 27, when the Police Armed Constabulary (PAC) was sent to threaten the villagers. Magistrates and police officials went to the women in the villages and suggested they persuade the men not to go into the forest and court violence lest the police resort to firing.

Usha, wife of Lakshman Singh of Barkala, answered the police by declaring that not only did they have no intention of stopping their men but that they intended to go themselves with their children as well. "If you have bullets, we have stones", she said.

Despite threats of dire consequences and the arrest of some activists, their determination did not falter. The administration was left with no alternative but to call a meeting for December 5 at which they first denied that any traditional right existed and, when it was proved that the working plan itself stated this, they attempted to sidetrack the issue by offering to sanction bank loans under various schemes of up to a crore of rupees. Nothing conclusive emerged from this meeting and matters were put off to December 22.

At this point, the men became confused and indecisive. One woman, Sona, said: "If nobody fights, we will, because the problem is eventually ours." The realisation that the struggle for the right to work, and for a basic human wage, is a matter of as much concern to women can become the turning point in any movement. The determination and militancy of the women of the Ghar region sharpened the Morcha as an instrument of

struggle. They organised programmes at the forest checkpoints to shout slogans demanding cutting rights.

When a forest corporation jeep entered Kotri village, the occupants were surrounded and abused for over an hour and the women wrote "*chor hai*" (they are thieves) on the jeep. The official in the jeep was too embarrassed to complain to the police. At Pelio village, the women beat a corporation official and a contractor while the police constable watched helplessly.

Strong women's groups have formed in Nagal, Barkal, Kotri, Shahjahanpur and Pelio where now the women know all the details of the pricing of *bhabbar* and even conduct programmes for health training.

In the Morcha, the women have equal rights and are present during discussions with the district magistrate. The police and officials feel a distinct lowering of their prestige in having to talk to illiterate Harijan women and are resentful of having to face their abuse.

Under the earlier pattern, only the family head was given the right to cut grass. Prolonged struggle and negotiations have finally returned to the women part of their traditional right which has now been given to all members of the family for two days in the year.

While the battle for full rights of 21 days a year and a more rational pricing of *bhabbar* moves to the state capital, Lucknow, the women seek to reestablish the special relationship between themselves and the forest. While singing songs they have composed about their movement, they enter the forest to cut the *bhabbar* grass:

*"The corporation, crooked and dishonest,
Has destroyed us.
To win back our rights
We have prepared a front..."*