

Feeding the Movement

Overburdened Women Get Sidelined

by
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As in previous movements in the hills of Uttarakhand, women's participation has been significant. Everyone acknowledges and appreciates the large numbers of women who take part, and their militancy.

I pose the following questions in a spirit of solidarity and constructive endeavour: Why is it that certain gender roles remain, in the context of the movement, unquestioned? Why is that a large number of women, who join at peak points, withdraw thereafter? Why do the women remain, for the outside world, nameless and faceless, in marked contrast to the enormous media attention, and even global fame, that a few men have achieved? Why is it that women's wisdom, which all the activists, even the leaders, acknowledge to be so important, is not further tapped, in consolidating struggles, in evolving alternatives?

I spent some 10 days at the *dharna* during April, this year. A clear division of roles, on the basis of gender, was apparent; virtually all the 'household' work at the *dharna* was being performed by

women, including fetching buckets of water, cooking meals for an average of 20 to 30 persons per meal, caring for the ill or ailing, and so on. In the primitive conditions prevailing at the *dharna*, all these tasks took on gargantuan proportions. Deeksha Behn, for instance, was getting up at 4 a.m. in order to fetch the water even though she had not gotten to sleep until way past midnight the night before. With dust-clouds blowing all around due to the hill-slopes denuded by blasting and other construction work, maintaining hygiene was extremely difficult. Cooking, with a small stove that had lost its pin, and a pressure-cooker whose gasket did not fit, was unimaginably tedious. The girl children, including Saraswati, Pushpa, Guddi and others were employed

virtually full-time on these tasks. So were Urmila Behn, Deeksha Behn, Sunita and some other women for different periods of time during their stay at the *dharna*.

Concentrating upon all these essential tasks meant less energy could be given to other tasks such as reading, updating oneself on events, discussing strategies, attending meetings, and engaging in mobilisation efforts. Considering that most of these women are extremely competent as activists, the entire movement suffers if their energies remain unavailable in this manner.

There is a need to undertake more mobilisation in villages. The submergence zone extends some 45 kms along the Bhilangana, upstream of Tehri. While villages up to Uppu

(some 15 kms from Tehri) have been approached intensively, other villages in the Bhagirathi valley have been approached only marginally; in the Bhilangana valley too, there is scope for much more work, particularly after the recent bus accident. Except for Radha Behn (who does not, strictly speaking,



Vimla Bahuguna, Sona Devi and Sudesha Devi cooking at *dharna* site

belong to the area), there has been no woman activist consistently working in the villages over the past few months. This is a great waste.

Most of the hill movements were originally led by women. But leadership has now passed into the hands of men. Women do much of the ground-work, and are more likely to take concrete action. Yet, once the movement's tide has ebbed, they tend to go back to their village homes, taking up once again the threads of their everyday lives, their subsistence activities. Most of the activists are older women, relatively free of household tasks. Otherwise they might not have been able to take part at all, even at the peak points of movements.

Several male activists trace their inspiration to their mothers or, more generally, to the ordinary, hardworking, woman of the hills. They, in some ways, might claim to represent these women. But surely it would be better if these women were allowed to voice their own concerns in their own words. Why should they remain nameless, faceless?

This is not a women-versus-men tussle at all, but something far more complex. Men accept that women in the hills are closer to their roots, to issues of survival, to issues relating concretely to the environment. If this is indeed so, then women's understanding, their approach, the differences in their priorities, in the issues they emphasise, should not be lost to the movement. If the women are more grounded, then they can teach the men how to become more grounded, too. Logically, they ought to be in a better position, also, to teach others in other parts of the world.

If women were more involved in the formation of strategy, I suspect that the movement would focus far more on local mobilisation, rather than



Photo: Sarvesh

Above: A Protest March against the Dam; Below: Still from Bhagirathi Ki Pukar showing a temple where people come to sit on dharna in different batches. This has been going on without a break since April 5, 1978.



The wall slogan reads: "Tehri dam is a symbol of total destruction. From Aprils, 1989 till date: As long as people consider Ganga unique, this dharna will continue".

on attracting outside support. If women's special approach, their militancy and intensity, is sincerely acknowledged, then surely far greater efforts need to be made to involve them more crucially in the working out of strategies and the designing of concrete alternatives. □

Bhagirathi ki Pukar

This documentary film by Anwar Jamal provides a vivid description of the local resistance as well as the environmental consequences of continuing with building the proposed dam.