

Women and Social Forestry in the Central Himalayan Region of India

by Brenda Cranney

En Himalaya, les programmes sociaux de sylviculture qui sont concernés par le déboisement des montagnes ont pour but de réduire le taux de pauvreté des résidents ainsi que de leur fournir du bois. Cependant, jusqu'à date, ces programmes n'ont pas réussi à atteindre leurs buts et de plus, ils sont incapables de fournir de l'aide aux femmes de milieux ruraux qui ont grand intérêt à sauvegarder les forêts.

Many areas in South Asia are facing an environmental crisis, but the devastation in the Himalayas has had a particularly disastrous impact on the quality of life in that region. Although the hill people bear the brunt of the crisis, those living in the plains and cities are affected as well. This article focuses on the district of Uttarakhand in the state of Uttar Pradesh and Solan and Sirmour districts of Himachal Pradesh. The Uttarakhand region embraces eight hill districts and has been the site of extreme deforestation, floods, and landslides. The area has a long history of resistance to so-called development.¹

Forestry development projects have been designed by the state and international agencies. They are called 'social forestry programs,' and include plantation and sawmill development. The objective of such projects has been to eradicate poverty by providing local people with both employment and access to much needed firewood. The international agencies and local bourgeoisie who own and operate the sawmills and plantations perceive the projects to be very successful. Regional production has increased and has indeed provided a higher income for some. On the other hand, as a result of the government's failure to provide for the

**Do not axe these oaks and pines—
nurture them, protect them,
From these trees the streams get
their water
and the fields their green.
Look how the rhododendron smiles
in the forest....**

**Wherever you see a vacant space
plant trees—
fodder trees, oak trees, broad-
leafed trees...**

from two Garhwali folk songs by
Ghan Shyam Shailani (Agarwal,
1986: 106)

equitable distribution of land, the peasants remain underemployed and without the promised access to firewood.

Development programs which have focused primarily on market economy in the Himalayas have contributed to an environmental crisis that has had a devastating impact on women from the poor peasant classes because of their particularly close relationship to and dependence on the environment. The food, fuel, and water crisis affecting the Uttarakhand region of Uttar Pradesh and Solan and Sirmour districts of Himachal Pradesh has its origins in the early development of the colonial period and is perpetuated by development politics today.

The exploitation of the forests has taken the form of commercial felling and monoculture plantations. In India, commercial felling has resulted in the loss of 1.3 million hectares of forests each year from 1975 to 1982 (Agarwal and Narain, 80). As a result of deforestation and

monoculture 'plantation' agriculture, there has been an extreme loss of groundwater, along with flooding, landslides, and destruction of biomass. Biomass—which includes food, fish, fuel (firewood, crop wastes, cowdung), fodder, fertilizer (forest litter, manure), building materials, and medicinal herbs—plays a crucial role in meeting the daily survival needs of most of the rural population (Agarwal and Narain, 172).

By the early 1970s, it was obvious that survival needs were not being met by multilateral development strategies. As a result, development strategies shifted to a 'basic needs' approach which emphasized improvements in nutrition, health, water, sanitation, housing and education. (Sen & Grown, 38) Robert McNamara, then president of the World Bank, called for "an attack on Third World Poverty...to reduce unemployment and underemployment, improve income distribution, develop appropriate or simpler, less-expensive technologies and address people's basic needs." (Buvinic and Yudelman, 35) Projects were instituted to counteract poverty either directly or indirectly. One such project was social forestry, implemented in many Indian States (Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh). 'Social forestry' is a term used to indicate tree-raising programs to supply firewood, fodder, small timber, and minor forest produce to rural populations (Agarwal & Narain, 51).

These programs were started in 1976 and are still in effect today. Since an estimated 30 million people depend on forest produce for some part of their subsistence, the need for the program was obvious (Agarwal, 1988: 108). There are



Photo: Brenda Cranney

two significant criticisms of the program, however. Oak forests, which provide for a wide variety of subsistence needs and staple food crops are replaced with monoculture eucalyptus plantations.² These plantations have been responsible for much of the ecological degradation that has taken place in the Uttarakhand region. In addition, wood produced from social forestry programs is actually meeting the needs of the urban and industrial market and not benefiting the rural poor in providing employment or wood. In Uttar Pradesh, the World Bank sponsored a farm forestry program that exceeded the tree planting target by 3,433 per cent, while the community woodlots fell short of their target by 92 per cent (Agarwal, 1989: 18). Over a decade later the social forestry program is the most controversial initiative of the Indian government. "I have seen many programs launched in the name of the poor but soon distorted to benefit the upper classes. But no program has been diverted further away from its objective than social forestry" (Agarwal and Narain, 52).

International funders of social forestry programs include: World Bank, United States Aid for International Development (USAID), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and SIDA (a German agency).

World Bank reports show that the development agencies and the owners of the commercial forestry plots are making money, while the level of poverty increases for the poor peasants. Benefits have not trickled down to the poor but instead have lined the pockets of the international agencies and the national elite.

To counteract some of the complaints about social forestry projects in Himachal Pradesh, the Rural Development Department began involving women in particular projects. Since 1987, women have been active in social forestry projects in Sirmour, Solan, and Dhauladhar regions. Interim reports, however, have shown that women's involvement is relatively superficial. The meetings have been restricted to executive members and have not allowed for a dialogue with the poor women who have the largest stake in the projects because of their close relationship to the forests. It has also become clear that the foresters (male) have taken responsibility for the selection of species to be planted, rather than consulting with the women who use the forests (Sarin, 1989: 15). The focus of the foresters is on fast-growing cash crops, while the women want trees that provide intermediate products for subsistence. Sarin's research has also shown that, given the existing social struc-

ture, the women do not control the cash income derived from their involvement in forestry.

Development projects such as social forestry have not worked for the following reasons: 1) they emphasize commercialization, 2) they are silent on structural changes such as landholding, and 3) they use a top-down approach for project identification, planning, and implementation (Sen and Grown, 39). Development in India is seen to be synonymous with capitalist development, with an emphasis on commercialization and economic growth. Projects based on capital accumulation lead to difficulties in a subsistence economy of the kind evident in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. The environmental crisis caused by the commercialization of forestry has had a devastating impact on the social fabric of these districts. The human face of this crisis is the fragmentation of the family, erosion of local authority structures and cooperating institutions, and an increased work load for women and children.

Women are responsible for the collection of fuel, water, fodder, and food. The top-down approach to development planning has meant that they have not been included in project development. They have not been asked what they need to be

able to sustain their family, although they have been the most affected by the crisis. As fuelwood becomes scarce, women in some areas of Uttarakhand are spending eight to ten hours a day for collection. (Swaminathan, 9; Dankelman). Lack of fuelwood is directly linked to malnutrition as more nutritious foods are substituted with those that require less cooking.

Gender relations have also been affected by the ecological crisis. Many men are migrating to the towns to find work, placing full responsibility on women for maintenance of the household (Jain; Jain and Banerjee; Berreman, 12; Sarin, 12). As well, because of their different agendas, men are more supportive of development projects than women (Guha, 147). Women are committed to using the environment to meet their subsistence needs, as they carry the responsibility for feeding and caring for the family. Men are more interested in becoming part of the money-ordered economy, and have supported the planting of cash crops such as potatoes at the expense of the indigenous forests. Men have not received a lot of money for their work in the plantations and what they have received is not passed on to the women but is often spent on liquor.³ As a result, women are placed in even greater need as the means of their subsistence disappears and they are not given money to replace their resources. This has led to fragmentation of the family unit, with women becoming more resistive to capitalism and development.

Women's relationship to the land as producers and providers of food is one of the most important aspects to be considered in rural development. Women produce more than half of the world's food but have title to only one percent of the land (Dankelman, 9). They make up the

majority of subsistence farmers, but their work is invisible. Women need access to land not just for food production, but also for fuel, fodder, and water. The perversion of agricultural systems and agro-industrialization have been the biggest contributors to land degradation in South Asia, leading to a food, fuel, and water crisis.

At the close of the third decade of United Nations development South Asia

development has been analyzed from an economic viewpoint with a total disregard for its political and cultural aspects. This is certainly true of India.

Rural poverty is a structurally induced condition connected to the relations of production and gender, nationally and internationally. As such, the alleviation of poverty cannot be achieved by promoting development schemes based on profit considerations alone. Inequalities based on class and gender need to be addressed before any positive changes can occur. The first change that should occur is a more equal redistribution of land, or at least, the provision of access to communal lands. Attempts have been made to do this, after Independence and at the beginning of the Green Revolution, but they have not been successful, because restrictions on the accumulation of property were not enforced by the government. To be effective, the local and national elite must support the redistribution of land. This could happen as they become more aware of the increasing degradation of the land and the value of human resources.

At an international level, the same considerations need to be addressed. Foreign development schemes must be based on an understanding of how the peasants depend on the land for subsistence. Any schemes that are set up in the rural areas need to include the peasants in the planning and implementation stages. The concept of 'tied aid' needs to be discontinued. If food or resources are needed to sustain a population, there

should not be strings attached that put the receiving country in a powerless position in relation to the donor country. The imperialist powers would no doubt be reluctant to give up this kind of power, therefore, any changes that occur would need to come through a revolution within the



Gathering fuelwood

Photo: Elizabeth Smaller

is facing the worst environmental crisis in its history. South Asia owes billions of dollars to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Why haven't these loans made an impact on the quality of life for the masses in South Asia? As Samir Amin points out, the failure of

country. There are a number of left wing organizations of the rural poor who are involved in the ongoing struggle against class and caste oppression. However, existing state policies and programs, as well as the left wing organizations, offer little optimism for poor rural women who carry the burden of poverty. By addressing only class and caste issues, the concerns of women are disregarded.

Women's subordination is a reflection of the relationships between culture, the economy, and politics, and because of these dialectical relationships, feminism cannot be separated from development. Feminism presents a challenge to global systems of power, exploitation, and inequality. Development planning and theory has overlooked half of the population that it purports to help. Women's roles as producers in the market and as reproducers of the labour force have been disregarded. Their relationship to the environment is crucial in the food chain, but this too has been ignored. The reluctance to involve women in development planning is reflective of the patriarchal attitudes of men in the Western world as well as of the men in the developing countries. As a result of the impact that feminists have made in this area, however, more women are now being included in development planning. Unfortunately, there is still a strong class bias in the planning, and poor peasant women are not visible. Until poor peasant women are included in the planning, development projects will not meet their needs.

Development has been very beneficial to a select few and detrimental to many. The ruling elite of South Asia have colluded with benefactors in the First World to improve their own quality of life. The history of this collusion goes back to colonial times when the elite bourgeoisie joined forces with the colonial rulers to control and rule the proletariat and the peasants. Today, the local elite give into the demands of multinationals and the IMF, knowing that they will benefit from the involvement. Peasants have had a long history of resistance that has intentionally not been well documented. This resistance continues today, but is dismissed, thereby denying the existence of class conflicts. As long as capitalist accumulation, these conflicts will persist.

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¹Many other areas of India face environmental devastation. See the work of Govind Kelkar for an analysis of forest development in Bihar, Agarwal and Narain for discussion of tribals in the Bastar region of Madhya Pradesh, to name a few.

²Eucalyptus trees do not provide fodder or food and their roots do not hold water, leading to soil erosion.

³Women in the Uttarakhand region have been involved in numerous struggles against the sale of liquor in the area. Anti-alcohol agitations were led by the Sarvodaya workers in the 1960s (Guha, 175).

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