

In my field research in the Himalayan hills of Himachal Pradesh, I am finding exceptions to every sort of generalisation I had read about and expected to find exemplified here about Third World rural women and environment. In this article, I will limit the discussion to the following popularised notions:

□ Women are the sole or primary collectors of fuel wood and fodder from forests.

□ Women work much longer hours than men.

□ Women are the holders of knowledge about the medicinal, cosmetic and other properties of forest plants.

□ Forest communities living near and dependent upon forest resources are poor.

□ Women are the key leaders and actors in ecological activism movements.

I am not at all disputing whether or not these claims are true for specific areas of India. Instead, I want to briefly outline what—given an expectation for finding some of the above characteristics—I have been learning in a particular village area in the hills of Himachal Pradesh.

Only Women Collect Fuel?

One day, I went out with three women friends for wood collecting near a small village in the Himachal hills, which I will call “Tipsu”.¹ The cluster of about eight large extended households which make up Tipsu sits perched high up on a steep mountainside amongst narrow agricultural terraces, grazing areas and “jungle” areas, or government Revenue and Forest Department lands. On this particular day we dropped below the houses and went to some tree groves which grow near the stream which supplies all the households with their drinking, washing and irrigation water. The

Exploding Myths

Women, Men and Work in a Himachal Village

Karen Gaul

women dragged large dead tree branches into clearings and used the same curved hand scythes they use for grass cutting to cut twigs off and to cut each branch (from about one inch to six inches in diameter) into roughly four foot lengths for snug bundles of approximately 50 pounds each, which each woman would carry on her head back up to the house.

The work was strenuous but not unduly so for several reasons. First,

“Babu”, or the husband and father of the household, had come the previous day to cut and drag out the largest chunks of dead wood and to split lengthwise those thick enough to do so. Many of those pieces were stacked neatly waiting for us. Secondly, this particular family has been replanting this grove area, their own private land, and some of the government land adjacent to their house for the last two decades. All of



the wood they burn! is dead and dried. Near the spot we had collected from that day, at least three very large trees were lying fallen and as yet untouched from a heavy snowfall two years previously.

The fact that this particular family actively provides for its own fuel wood and fodder through replanting is something of a rarity in these largely barren hillsides, but in this it is not completely alone. Whether on private land on an individual family basis, or as part of either the Forest Department's Social Forestry Scheme, or the more grassroots "Greening of Himalayas" project, or even with the local horticulture projects sponsored by one of the state's horticulture and forestry universities, planting by various people for a multitude of purposes is carried out.² Further, that the women and men jointly work to gather, store or use these resources is not so rare. It would be difficult to guess whether Babu or the women expended more kilocalories in each of these different stages of wood gathering. In this case, because of its relatively ready availability, we took enough wood for what we estimated would provide for 10-12 days of winter cooking.³ My friend "Anu" told me that oftentimes several of the uncles (father's brothers who constantly revisit and work at the place and, if they and all of their families were counted, would put the total number of "members" of the household at about 20-25 people) come up and store large amounts of wood for use during the cold weeks of late December and January. But this year, for various reasons, they were not able to do so and the more permanent members, most of them female, put it up themselves.

Boys and girls, women and men, cut grass and collect fodder. Grazing cows or herds of sheep and goats is



Carrying manure

similarly done by any member of the household. Women and men spin wool; anyone might weed the kitchen garden. Because I travel two hours on foot both to and from the village of Tipsu, I cover a lot of both valley floor area and hilly cultivated area, and many of those householders have also become known to me. I often talk with the same groups of grass cutters on the hillsides, or herders out with animals. This larger regional perspective, although somewhat more superficial, has affirmed some of these same labour-sharing patterns: male and female youths and adults share and trade tasks of herding, grass, fodder and fire wood cutting and carrying, and collection of other materials from the forests (such as herbs for teas, or plants and fruits for eating). In the several months that I've been working in this village area, one thing remains consistently clear: almost everyone works very hard.

However, far from wanting to paint an idyllic, egalitarian picture of harmonious village life, I want only to point out that in Tipsu and surrounding villages, women and

men, boys and girls, share forest-related and most agricultural work in a somewhat fluid and cooperative way. Still, men do not carry water on their heads, cook, wash clothing, sweep the house, redung the floors, sew, bathe the children, prepare them for school or wash the dishes. Women almost never plough the fields, or undertake machinery repairs or building repairs or construction. So, while much of the work in terms of both cultivated and noncultivated (or *jungli*) plant resources is shared between women and men in Tipsu, domestic work certainly is more strictly divided in terms of sex.

Knowledge about Plants

Agarwal noted that "poor peasant and tribal women have typically been responsible for fetching fuel and fodder..." (1989:10), and later implies that the tasks of both knowing about food and medicinal plants, as well as seed selection, largely falls to women (Ibid:44). With the extent of research she has done, I do not doubt that Agarwal has some case study bases upon which to rest these claims (indeed, she cites related works).

However, not only in popular literature, but also in many conversations with people, such an assumption is often made. Often, when I mention in conversations that my research is on gender and forest resources, people offer the comment that it's the poor women who have to do the bulk of the work in relation to the forests, and they, therefore, have more knowledge and understanding about it. This occurs both in the US and in India, often in urban settings. In two urban areas, recently, this popularised notion of women being the primary holders of knowledge about a variety of plant properties, was volunteered to me on four different occasions by people who were educators or administrators.

Again, while this may indeed be true in some areas, in my experience it is not pervasively true in Himachal.

I have observed that often, when I am in the village asking questions about forest plants, the answering process goes something like this: Anu, working or sitting next to me will say, “Umm, I think the kanth (mulberry) becomes ripe around mid October...” and she will turn to her sister to verify. Sita will think about it and say, “Yes, late October, early November... Babu?...” And she will call down to her father working on a terraced field below. He may ask his wife or his brother for verification. They all come to a consensus and present an answer to me. Similarly, if someone has an upset stomach or a cold, most of the teenaged children and adults in the household know the basic ingredients for a soothing tea, although the older women and men, who have spent a couple of decades out grazing animals or cutting grass, have the more detailed understanding.

Again, while I am not arguing that all knowledge is general and shared, a large proportion of it is. The finer details of the ways in which knowledge may be gender-specific is the focus for the remainder of my research period. However, at this stage I am struck by the degree to which all adult or near-adult members of the household are equally knowledgeable about plants and their uses, whether for human consumption, animal care, construction, and so on.

One evening around dusk, I was walking with Anu in a deep gully between two ridges. She told me that for some people, such a place at such a time of day could be seen as dangerous and frightening. Several years previously, when her younger brother was a toddler, he and his mother were crossing this very place



Men harvesting wheat

at dusk. The child took a fright and began crying and crying and could not stop all through the night. Their mother took him to the local herbalist/healer, who has received his knowledge about plants from his father, and he from his father for countless generations. People from many surrounding ham-lets go to him for anything from fever to fright, and they respect him as a very knowledgeable and gifted man. I have begun a series of interviews with this healer as well. I have been told of other healers in nearby areas who are often men, but sometimes women; and sometimes, a married couple will both share this knowledge.

Forest People are Poor

Poverty can be defined in many ways, depending upon the criteria, and I certainly do not have sufficient data to make specific claims about the standard of living or level of need among people in the area around Tipsu. But on a descriptive level, people in Tipsu live fairly comfortably, care for a fair number of animals, raise enough cultivated crops (primarily maize, wheat and mustard) to feed

their own families, and occasionally are able to grow enough surplus to sell in the market. In addition to maize for their own year-round consumption, they grow all of the *dais*, most vegetables, wheat and some spices and herbs, which occasionally are supplemented with those bought from the market. Fodder, firewood, rope materials, fruits, grasses, construction materials and occasional small animals (such as grouse) are taken from the jungle areas. Wool for weaving is taken from their own herds of sheep. What they don't grow in particular they may barter for with neighbours. Things purchased in the market include soap, school supplies, clothes, some spices, sugar and those fruits or vegetables not grown in Tipsu. While the range of land-holding size and quality (and thus productivity) vary, very few people in the area are landless. In larger networks of extended families, some adult siblings may work in government jobs while others maintain the family landholdings. In this way, produce from the land is shared between many members of the

extended family, and cash income is shared with those who have none as well. In such arrangements of sharing and exchange of resources, basic necessities of food, clothing, education (in some but not all cases) get taken care of.

In spite of some people doing fairly well, or, at least, in most cases getting by from cultivated plants and gathered forest resources, for the most part, the hills surrounding Tipsu are quite barren. People tell me that, a generation ago, they walked to school amidst slopes covered with many more trees. Such memories of greener terrain have been repeated to me by quite a large number of people by now, ranging from middle-aged to aged adults, and even noted by some children from around 10-20 years of age. These memory maps of the

suggested above, the current decrease in availability of these resources seems to be a crucial turning point.

An important companion to this stereotype about poverty is a set of contradictory stereotypes about either carelessness and ignorance, or in-formed prudence regarding forest use. This debate alone could provide material for countless pages of discussion. Sometimes, people will suggest to me, "These people [meaning villag-ers] drink a lot, so don't think to replant the forest areas", or else they will suggest, "These people have been liv-ing in a sustainable manner for centuries." Both of these are extreme positions which are broad generalisations, and rarely grounded in case study examples or even

centuries, or that they know nothing about ecology, don't think about the future and are only interested in short term gains. I think it is important to remember that even on an individual basis there is variation: any one individual person may be prudent sometimes and careless other times; may legally collect wood most of the time, but occasionally cut illegally or vice versa.

Only Women Are Saviours of Nature?

In Berreman's classic ethnogra-phy, *Hindus of the Himalayas* (1972), he characterises hill communities as less restricted in terms of both caste and gender distinctions than people on the plains. While I think this could be said to be generally true for hill areas in Himachal, it certainly does not mean that women are free of rather intense social restrictions. It is somewhat refreshing and encouraging to see women in the markets either alone or with female companions, and it is not at all unusual for women to greet and enter into casual roadside conversation with men. But this should not disguise certain constraints and restrictions still in place as a function of social rules firmly directing gender differentiation, and women's place within it.

On a recent tour of some reforestation projects in other areas of Himachal, I and some other American students were offered tea at someone's home. The tour group was actually quite large, and as we all marched into the courtyard, I noticed a sick baby goat huddled right in the line of traffic. I pointed out the goat to some of the household women who were sitting all together on a veranda. No one came to the goat's assistance, so I scooped it up and placed it near the women under a large basket. When I was later asking one of the



Gaddi women at an all-women's festival

landscape offer important indications for the tracing of the rate and extent of denudification of these hills, and it seems quite important to note that in this area, the lack of availability of some of these forest resources is occurring just in the last few generations. The one family in the village that their daily needs with difficulty. But there is a large range of both amounts taken from forest areas, and degrees of dependency on those resources, as well as different degrees of attempts at re-source renewal. As

personal experience. While the debates around these notions could provide fuel for a great deal more discussion, I will simply state here what is becoming an obvious theme in my entire discussion: particular places involving particular people and their specific sets of resources and knowledge vary. The configuration is always complex, and there should be no simple characterisations such as that people in Tipsu are concerned about forests and are living in a prudent and sustainable way as they have for

male leaders of the tour about women's participation in ecological activism (or "social work" as it is often referred to), he reminded me of the goat incident, saying that the women's reluctance to get up and remove the sick goat in the presence of all of us strangers, even though they knew they should, is illustrative of how strong their sense of social restrictions are.

Of the handful of most active ecological activist leaders I have met to date in the state, all are men. (Such gender division within Himalayan environmental activism was perceptively commented upon by Deepti Priya in the May-June 1992 issue of *Manushi* as well). Recently, an intensive multipronged campaign

which promotes literacy and environmental awareness, as well as issues of health and hygiene, has been undertaken in the state. While it is linked to the national *gyan vigyan* literacy programme, in this area it has integrated particular local concerns such as reforestation, erosion, literacy for village women, and so on. Most of the main organisers and promoters of this campaign are men: some are members in the local government, some administrative officers, some school teachers, and some social workers. On a second tier, some of the volunteer teachers and teacher trainers are women. Yet all of the men and women involved in the organisation and administration of this programme are, obviously,

educated and, to some extent, could be described as "middleclass".⁴ In this debunking of a popular notion of women's grassroots involvement, I am, in fact, disappointed and sorry to say that women are not very involved on the village level in these northern areas of Himachal. At a recent annual meeting of Chipko friends in Tehri (June 1993), about half a dozen women (including my-self) attended part of the first day of meetings. By the second day, I was the only woman present among one hundred participants. Although women have been actively involved in the Tehri Garhwal area in some protest actions in the past through Chipko, the current leadership is almost a hundred percent male.

Rattan Chand Sharma, the *pradhan* of Jadera panchayat and a resident of Chamba in Himachal Pradesh, has been a persistent and innovative advocate of workers' rights, environmental issues, education and literacy.

Recently, his panchayat area was involved in a three-year 'Greening of Himalaya' project, which was sponsored by the National Wasteland Development Board (NWDB), but fashioned and managed by this *pradhan* and the villagers. In this project, sections of land were selected, fenced off, planted and guarded and protected by local *chowkidars*. Species selected for planting included those broadleaf trees and shrubs that could provide fodder, fruits and nuts, branches for fuel, pollen for honey bees and nesting for many birds and forms of wildlife. In some areas survival rates for saplings is nearly a hundred percent. Slopes that were highly eroded and degraded are now a thick and rich



green with young growth. Rattan Chand compares the relatively low expenses for upkeep, the survival rate and the species diversity to the corresponding features in forest department plantations which do not have such high survival rates, cost more to maintain, and usually have only a few species, including the fast growing but not very useful *M1* pine (for a related discussion on Jadera, see Khanna and Vania article in *Down to Earth*, Spring, 1992).

Prior to the formal 'Greening' project in Jadera, Rattan Chand had experimented with reforestation and

protection and distribution of the products of those forests to the villagers of Jadera. He continues to work on educating the local villagers, including the trans humant Gujjars and Gaddis of the area, on forest protection, and careful grazing and lopping management, whether through organised camps, informal sessions on the lawn of the panchayat building, or in casual meetings with people on the roads.

While he is very committed to involving women in the cooperative societies they have set up, in the literacy programme they are running, and in this ongoing environmental awareness, he recognises the limitations women are up against in terms of traditional societal roles, and the difficulty they face in coming forward to assume leadership positions. Still, he urges as much participation as he can elicit from the women and young girls, as well as from the village men and boys. □

Thus, at this juncture, each of these popularised assumptions about “Indian women and the environment” has been disrupted by my experiences in Himachal. While women and men certainly do hold a very rich knowledge about their forest environments, this knowledge is by and large shared, although domestic tasks (and knowledge) are not. The distinctions in terms of gender-specific knowledge may be much more subtle and will be interesting to pursue, in light of the fact that so much is known by both women and men. This overlapping knowledge obviously comes from work that is intimately integrated with forest areas, and it is because these tasks are also shared that the knowledge is gained by men and women both. And, while some women and some men have expressed interest in and have participated in various ecological projects, women are still very much limited in their actions due to longstanding and extremely slow changing social expectations and pressures. Thus, the shared work and knowledge of forest related work must be seen in a broader context of existing gender inequalities and the positions of leadership in much of the local environmental organisations being held by men. Each of these turns asked the more popularised notions I had some reason to expect to be true when I began the field research.

Understanding of these interrelationships between people, their resources, and the dynamic of gender differences must be based in specific case studies, with as much detail as possible. Popularised, generalised and stereotyped representations of women and their relationships to their forest environments do not serve much purpose for a more thoughtful understanding of particular women’s lives. □



Literacy training camp at Jadera, run primarily by men

Endnotes

1. I have followed the anthropological convention of using pseudonyms for people’s names as well as place names.
2. I certainly don’t mean to conflate all tree planting as “good” for the local environment. In fact, the different views on this have triggered a great deal of debate in this area.
3. By winter cooking, I mean the extended hours of fire burning in the *chullah* during cold days and evenings for cooking as well as for warmth. Here children do their homework, women knit, men might spin wool, and much more social time is spent near the stove than in summer months. In the summer, the same amount of wood might last 15-20 days.
4. It could be argued that if these motivated folks did not launch and sustain the literacy and environmental awareness campaign, it would not happen. At this point in time, and at the village level for this area, I am afraid that conclusion would turn out to be true.

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