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Gender Technology and Development 2001 5: 341

DOI: 10.1177/097185240100500301

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What is This?

Empowerment and Disempowerment of Forest Women in Uttarakhand, India

MADHU SARIN¹

Empowering women of forest based societies to participate in local forest management has become an essential rhetorical commitment of donor funded 'participatory' forestry projects and state policies for devolution of forest management. Instead of increasing women's empowerment, the top-down interventions of a World Bank funded forestry project in Uttarakhand are doing the opposite by disrupting and marginalizing their own struggles and achievements, transferring power and authority to the forest department and local elite men. A number of case studies illustrate the project's insensitivity to the dynamic functioning of existing self-governing institutions and the women's ongoing struggles within them to gain greater voice and control over forest resources for improving their quality of life and livelihood security. The article argues for active engagement of forest women and their communities in the policy and project formulation process itself, which permits building upon women's and men's own initiatives and struggles while strengthening gender-equal democratization of self-governing community forestry institutions.

What factors trigger changes in women's position in a patriarchal forest based society? And how effective are devolution policies rhetorically committed to empowering women to participate in forest management? This article explores these questions with the help of case studies spread over nine districts of Uttarakhand (now the major part of the state of Uttaranchal newly constituted in November 2000) in north India. Beginning from colonial rule in the 19th century, 67 percent of the region's uncultivated commons, critical for sustaining its subsistence based agro-pastoral livelihood systems,

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Gender, Technology and Development 5 (3), 2001
Sage Publications New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London

have progressively been appropriated by the state as 'forests.' The accompanying reduction in villagers' forest access in a context where use of forest resources has traditionally been considered 'women's work' has had a profound impact on reshaping traditional gender relations. More recently, a host of state policies have attempted to promote women's socio-economic and political empowerment. These have included normative interventions such as the reservation of one third seats for women in *panchayati raj* institutions for local self-government and the promotion of all-women *van panchayats* (elected councils for managing village forests) combined with more innovative government programs such as Mahila Samakhya (women's empowerment) focused on mobilizing women for self-empowerment.

A recent policy intervention for devolution of forest management through village forest joint management (VFJM) introduced through a World Bank funded forestry project has been overlaid on the existing and ongoing state initiatives. The forestry project also has a stated commitment to specifically target women and the poor as project 'beneficiaries.' In addition, there are several other government and donor funded projects (such as watershed development, water resource development, and diversification of agriculture), each with its own component and strategy for enhancing women's participation. All these interventions have been introduced in a regional context which has a long history of people's own struggles for rights over land, forests, and water, of which the Chipko Movement of the 1970s is most famous. More significantly, village women themselves have been organizing their own struggles within their households and communities to gain greater control over their forests, as it is their daily lives which are most intimately impacted by forest quality, proximity to the village, and institutional structures determining forest access.

This article begins with a brief overview of the historical evolution of the complex diversity of tenurial regimes for common lands and community institutions for their management in Uttarakhand. The second section examines local struggles to gain greater control over forest use and management, and the forces aiding and hindering such struggles within existing formal as well as informal community institutions. The third section discusses case studies undertaken to examine the impact of devolution policies for forest management on creating space for local control over decision making, forest quality,

and management for enhancing livelihoods. Due to women's continuing centrality in the use and management of forest resources in Uttarakhand, the case studies gave special attention to the impact of devolution policies on gender relations and women's spaces for forest management. The final section examines the impact of the recent forest devolution policy of VFJM and promoting women's representation in *van panchayats*.

The Context for Forest Management in Uttarakhand

Nestled in the Central Himalayas, Uttarakhand is an area with rich forests and unique biodiversity. According to the 1991 census, Uttarakhand's population was 5.93 million, 78 percent of which lived in rural areas. The rural population of the hill areas is even higher at over 90 percent. Whereas the area had an economy of abundance at the time of colonial occupation in the early 19th century (Guha, 1989; Nanda, 1999), today an estimated 45 percent of its economically productive workforce is employed outside the region for lack of local employment. Whereas only 12.6 percent of the hill region's area is officially under cultivation (Saxena, 1995), rural livelihoods are sustained by authorized as well as unauthorized use of about 60 percent of the total geographic area comprising both cultivated and uncultivated lands. Sixty-seven percent of Uttarakhand's total geographic area, representing most of the uncultivated commons, stands legally notified as 'forests' (Ghildyal and Banerjee, 1998). Unlike many other states, all the forest land is not under the jurisdiction of the forest department. About 69 percent is reserve forest under the forest department's control, about 16.8 percent is protected forest under the revenue department's jurisdiction (called civil land in the Kumaon region and *soyam* land in the erstwhile state of Tehri Garhwal, it is managed by the revenue department in collaboration with elected village *panchayats*), and 13.6 percent consists of legally notified village forests managed by elected *van panchayats*. Although socio-economic differentiation has increased over the years, the village communities are relatively homogeneous compared to the high social stratification in the plains. Land distribution is relatively equal, with rare cases of land holdings of over 2 hectares, and landlessness is low.

Women own or control little of the privately held land, and their forest rights are mediated through the male household head in whose

name they are recorded. The agro-pastoral economy of the region is still predominantly subsistence based, with about 50 percent of rural households, including the rural elite, having high dependence on village commons and forest lands. The high level of migration of men in search of employment makes the women effective managers of the rural household economy. About 40 percent of households are estimated to be headed by women (CECI, 1998, quoted in Ecotech, 1999). The gender based division of labor is highly skewed, with women responsible for most agricultural work (barring ploughing and marketing), livestock care (except during seasonal migration and marketing), and collection of firewood, fodder, leaf litter, and non-timber forest produce from village commons and forest lands.

The history of state appropriation of the uncultivated commons has had a profound impact on reshaping traditional gender relations in the area. Prior to British conquest in 1815, community institutions of the hill peasantry had effectively exercised direct control over the use and management of both cultivated lands and the uncultivated commons within customary village boundaries, with little interference from earlier rulers (Agarwal, 1996; Guha, 1989; Nanda, 1999; Somanathan, 1991). Agriculture and animal husbandry comprised inseparable components of hill farming systems dependent on spatially and temporally integrated use of cultivated and uncultivated lands. Seasonal migration to alpine pastures and grasslands prevented resource degradation by dispensing with the need for uninterrupted use. High dependence on the forests generated conservation values embedded in cultural and religious traditions, such as the maintenance of sacred groves. Traditional village *panchayats* dealt with community affairs and inter- and intra-village disputes (Guha, 1989). Despite women being the primary users of forest resources, tradition excluded them from political decision making at the community level.

A number of interventions during colonial rule permanently altered this landscape of integrated local resource use and management, initially in Kumaon and British Garhwal under direct rule, and subsequently even in the adjoining princely state of Tehri Garhwal. In 1823, the colonial regime undertook the first land revenue settlement in the Kumaon region, categorizing the land within customary village boundaries as cultivated *naap* (measured) and uncultivated *benaap* (unmeasured) lands. In 1893, all unmeasured 'waste' (*benaap*)

lands in Kumaon were declared 'district protected forests' under the control of the district commissioners. During 1910–17, the colonial government attempted to appropriate further control over forest resources by notifying over 7,500 sq. km of the commons in British territory as reserve forests, severely restricting people's use rights. People's 'rights and concessions,' such as for grazing and lopping for fuelwood and fodder, so essential for sustaining the agro-pastoral economy, were severely curtailed. The annual practice of burning the forest floor for increasing grass yields was banned within one mile of the reserve forests. As few settlements remained at such a distance from the new reserves, it virtually made the practice illegal (Guha, 1989).

Struggles for Local Forest Rights

Forest reservation led to large-scale rebellion and incendiarism (literally setting the reserve forests ablaze in protest against the denial of traditional access to them) as it played havoc with the customary patterns of resource use, dislocating existing agrarian practices. The report of the Kumaon Grievances Committee,² set up by an alarmed administration to look into the causes of unrest among the people, contains perceptive insights into the prevalent gendered nature of resource use and gender relations. It identified the 'employment of forest guards to enforce numerous rules and regulations and their constant interference with women and children who, under the customs in vogue in Kumaon, are the chief people to exercise on behalf of the villagers such rights as lopping, collection of minor forest produce, grazing, etc.' (GOUP, 1922) as a major grievance. Lopping restrictions imposed in the new reserves accounted for 75 percent of the recorded offences. Although there was no *purdah* in the hills, the men bitterly resented women being summoned to court for such 'offences.' Men's sentiments against the forest guards' daily interference with women's use of the forest caused the Grievances Committee to recommend that 'the forest guard be removed so as to do away with the real grievance in all classes of forests where it can possibly be effected' (ibid). As a consequence, of the 7,500 sq. km of the new reserves, 4,460 sq. km of the less commercially valuable forests were taken away from the forest department and handed back to the

revenue department with full restoration of people's forest rights. However, rights in these Class I reserves were given to 'all bonafide residents of Kumaon,' thereby converting customary common property resources into open access areas. Provision was made for *van panchayats* to exercise community control over legally constituted 'village forests' demarcated from within the Class I reserves and civil forests, though applicable only in those villages which applied for them. This enabled sections of the peasantry to retrieve some space for local forest management. Thus, by the early 20th century, the uncultivated commons had been divided into three legal categories of forests: commercially valuable Class II reserves under the forest department; commercially less valuable Class I reserves; and civil/*soyam* forests under the civil administration.³ This did not appease the villagers' discontent over curtailed resource rights, and protests continued.

The independent state of India continued commercial forest exploitation with even greater vigor. The reach of the forest department and its contractors spread to the remotest corners with expansion of the road network. Local livelihoods received even less attention than under colonial rule as state policy consistently favored export of raw timber and resin for processing by large industry in the plains. By the 1970s, the Chipko Movement had emerged to demand that priority be given to local employment in the extraction and processing of forest produce (Guha, 1989). Increasing incidents of landslides and floods and the declining availability of biomass for subsistence needs propelled even hill women into the movement, broadening the popular base of Chipko protests. Ironically, the Kumaon *van panchayat* rules of 1931 were revised in 1976 at the height of the Chipko Movement, substantially reducing *van panchayat* authority and entitlements even over village forests.

The issue of local forest rights, however, was soon subsumed within the new national and global ideology of environmental conservation. Instead of priority to local forest based livelihoods and employment, Chipko was used to justify a spate of centralizing environmental policies and laws. The Forest Conservation Act of 1980 empowered the central government to make decisions related to the alienation of even the smallest patch of forest land. The Uttar Pradesh Resin and Forest Produce Act of 1976 made tapping, sale, and purchase of all resin a state monopoly. In 1981, a 15-year ban

was imposed (and has since been extended) on all commercial felling in the Uttar Pradesh Himalayas above 1,000 m.⁴ Today the only permitted fellings are for the villagers' timber rights (*haq haquque*) based on consumption recorded in 1911–17, which has not been revised since.

Despite extensive state appropriation and continuing centralization of control over forests, Uttarakhand today provides extensive examples of a unique combination of officially constituted and informal community forest management (CFM) institutions, the latter increasingly developed by women's groups. Autonomous community management of legally demarcated 'village forests' (on forest and revenue department land) by *van panchayats* has existed in Uttarakhand for over seven decades. Traditionally practicing restricted democracy due to their almost exclusive control by men, some *van panchayats* have been undergoing internal transformation with women appropriating control over their management. Unofficial community management, with diverse institutional arrangements on all legal categories of forest lands, has co-existed with formally constituted *van panchayats*, and in fact predates them from pre-colonial times.

As the largest custodian of state property,⁵ the forest department has been unable to maintain the forests in good condition or to meet people's forest based livelihood needs. Its responsibility for enforcing the Forest Conservation Act and the Wildlife Protection Act has reinforced its image as an anti-people agency. Thus, in 1988–89, some of the Chipko activists who had spearheaded the movement against commercial forest felling felt compelled to start yet another, relatively less-known *ped kato andolan* (cut the trees movement). They argued that the Forest Conservation Act 'was being used to hold up basic development schemes for the hill villages while the builders' mafia continued to flout it brazenly under the guise of promoting tourism' (Rawat, 1998: p. 128). More recently, resource displacement and loss of livelihoods caused by the expansion of the protected area network over 20 percent of the geographic area of Uttarakhand has produced the *jhapto cheeno andolan* (snatch and grab movement), reflecting the intense feelings of alienation and disempowerment. Women who earned international fame for stopping contractors from felling their forests during Chipko have come to hate the word *paryavaran* (environment). As one of these women

from Reni village complained: 'They have put this entire [surrounding forest] area under the Nanda Devi National Park. I can't even pick herbs to treat a stomach ache any more' (Mitra, 1993: p. 35).

Both the *van panchayat* and unofficial CFM systems now confront challenges from new systems being imposed on villagers by the state. Under a World Bank funded forestry project, the Uttar Pradesh forest department has promoted village forest joint management (VFJM) with autonomous *van panchayats*. This is in contrast to joint forest management (JFM) on degraded reserve and protected forests under forest department jurisdiction in other states. It is misleading to refer to the UP VFJM approach as JFM. This hides the crucial difference from JFM in other states—that *van panchayats* had enjoyed autonomous authority over forests prior to VFJM. Reserve forest areas are also to be included in VFJM, but till the time of this research (2000), the scheme had primarily focused on *van panchayat* and civil/*soyam* lands (CDS, 2000). Thus, VFJM is creating space for the forest department to intrude on village forests managed by community institutions instead of creating space for villagers to participate in the management of reserve forests under departmental jurisdiction. The decision making autonomy of *van panchayats* participating in VFJM is now 'subject to the supervision, direction, control and concurrence of the Divisional Forest Officer' (FDUP, 1997: 3.1). A functionary of the forest department has been made the joint account holder and proposed member secretary of *van panchayats* (GOU, 2001), after having played no role for seven decades.

At the same time, informal community management is under pressure from the state-directed and target-driven new *van panchayat* formation. The revenue department is demarcating civil forest lands under its jurisdiction as village forests to be managed by officially constituted *van panchayats*. The department is also dividing existing multi-village *van panchayats*, without consulting them, into single-village ones, often generating inter-village inequity and conflict in the process. 'Eco-development committees' promoted by the wildlife wing of the forest department solicit villagers' 'participation' in replacing their existing forest-dependent livelihoods (against their will) with new, non-forest based alternatives. Decisions earlier taken by villagers through negotiation and consensus building, such as whether to take up community management at all, whether to do so

officially or unofficially, and whether to do so at a hamlet, village, or multiple village level, are now being taken by the state on their behalf through the formation of new *van panchayats*. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups, which had earlier played an important role in policy advocacy and in spearheading social movements, have largely been co-opted to work as 'private service providers' for the many donor funded projects in the region.

Women in Informal Community Forest Management

Community forest management outside any formal legal framework is widespread in Uttarakhand in all categories of forest lands within or near villages. Traditional informal community institutions (*lath panchayats*), informal forest committees (*van samitis*), and, more recently, increasing numbers of Mahila Mangal Dals (women's welfare associations) are regenerating and regulating the use of reserve and civil/*soyam* forest lands, often compelling unofficial co-operation by forest and revenue department staff. These informal community management systems represent another important form of appropriation of space for local forest management.

Women's ability to appropriate such forest management space outside any formal policy framework is shaped by diverse influences and factors. These include the degree of local scarcity of forest resources, and therefore the conflicts and competition governing access to essential forest products; the extent of migration of men from the area; women's exposure to and participation in social movements such as Chipko or empowerment programs such as Mahila Samakhya; and the support of progressive local men leaders and the indirect impact of positive discrimination policies such as the reservation of one third seats for women in *panchayati raj* institutions or the promotion of all-women *van panchayats*. In our 16 case studies, we found village women actively engaged in informal community forest management in eight cases, either exclusively through women's groups or together with men.

Holta, one of our case study villages, is a large village of 400 households in Tehri Garhwal district which has a rich tradition of informal CFM. In part, this is because the *van panchayat* rules were not made applicable to the area coming under the erstwhile state of Tehri Garhwal till 1991. Due to not having a *van panchayat*, Holta village

initiated the protection of its *sanjaiti* (communal) land around 1986 entirely on its own. The area has a high dependence on agriculture with limited migration of men. Literacy rates are low and most men work in the village itself or for wages or in small shops on the roadside in the vicinity. Although there is visible dominance of men in the village, the local self-government institution (*gram sabha*), is headed by a woman. Interestingly, Holta's informal forest protection committee had no women representatives when it was first constituted 13 years ago. However, despite the *samiti* employing a guard for protection, women of neighboring villages as well as those of Holta itself continued stealing firewood and grass from the forest. According to the men, due to their failure in stopping the women, they had inducted four women as members of the committee about five years ago to 'get thieves to nab other thieves' (Gairola, 1999a).

Interestingly, the young men in the village had applied for forming a *van panchayat* six years ago but had received no response from the administration. Asked why they wanted a *van panchayat* when their informal system was working so well, the men felt that a *van panchayat* had greater access to government funds for plantations. They had heard about generous budgets for VFJM. The women, in contrast, did not want any funds or government scheme. They were proud of their regenerated forest from which they could meet their biomass needs. On being told that the government was promoting the formation of all-women *van panchayats* and that if they submitted such an application it was likely to be cleared quickly, the women's faces lit up. However, the men were taken aback. They said that the village women were illiterate and knew little. They would not be able to handle the work. It was then pointed out that the *pradhan* (village head) of the Holta *gram sabha* was a woman who was also non-literate. If she could be a *panchayat pradhan*, why could women not manage a *van panchayat*?

According to Holta villagers, water sources had dried up and firewood and fodder had become scarce as a result of unregulated forest use by surrounding villages and encroachment on the common land by local families. Some village youth successfully persuaded the encroachers to vacate the commons, setting an example by giving up their own encroachments. Letters were sent to the *pradhans* of surrounding villages that anyone entering the forest would be fined. Major conflicts followed, with one village going to court against Holta due to the unclear boundaries of their respective common

lands. However, with improvement in the forest condition and availability of water, the resistance declined.

At the time of our research in 1999–2000, the entire village's biomass needs, except timber, were met from the regenerated forest. Vegetable cultivation had become feasible with the regeneration of three natural water sources. Rules have been framed for grass, tree leaf fodder and firewood collection and were strictly enforced, with all households contributing to pay a guard. The informal forest protection committee had representation from all hamlets and castes, and four women representatives of the village Mahila Mangal Dal, empowered by the government's Mahila Samakhya program, had also been able to wedge their way in. Community relations with the forest department, however, were extremely sour. In the words of the village women, 'the Forest Department has made us into thieves. The women were protecting their forest like their own children' (Gairola, 1999a).

Women and men had different perspectives on gender-specific changes in the forest protection *samiti*. According to the women, after gaining exposure and self-confidence through the government's Mahila Samakhya program, they had had to fight hard to gain representation in the protection committee. Due to the limited migration of men from the area, the women have had few opportunities to occupy leadership roles. The men had resisted their demands saying that they were protecting the forest for the benefit of the women and there was no need for the women to become members themselves. The men had also raised the difficulty of deciding which caste groups the women should represent, as the men of all castes considered themselves indispensable. The women insisted that since seats were now reserved for them even in *panchayats*, the same could be done for the village forest protection committee. After two women were elected as ward members during the *panchayat* elections, they were made members of the forest protection *samiti* (FPS) also. Significantly, most members of the FPS are also ward members of the village *panchayat*.

According to the women, all their grass, firewood, and bamboo requirements are now met from the forest. Similarly, all the villagers' small timber needs for agricultural implements, such as sickles, ploughs, and axes, are met from the forest. Everyone is satisfied with the work of the forest protection *samiti*. Daily life has become much easier for their daughters and daughters-in-law. Although a few

troublesome individuals do keep creating problems now and then, it is easy to keep them quiet as the women of their families too are benefiting from easy availability of firewood and fodder. When asked whether the villagers had helped put out fires in government forests during the summer, the women's response was:

Why should we help when those are not our forests? The Forest Department does not permit us to lift even a dry branch from them. After the government forests are burnt, we are able to fetch firewood from them. So we actually benefit from fires in government forests. We have not taken a contract for environmental protection! If there is environmental damage, it should equally affect the Forest Department. They are also citizens of this country but behave as if they are the descendants of the British! (Gairola, 1999a).

Such antipathy towards forest department staff is widespread among village women. The women of Dhar Kot village in Pratapnagar block of Tehri district tied the forester and members of the forest patrol to trees and continued lopping green oak leaf fodder for their cattle. The forest staff kept shouting their heads off the whole day in the thick forest, but who was there to hear them? While most village men were fully aware of their rights and the procedures for exercising them, the women knew next to nothing about such matters.

In several hamlets of the three villages under Makku *van panchayat*, Mahila Mangal Dals had asserted informal control over patches of civil or communal land closer to their settlements for day to day management of firewood and fodder. According to the former *sarpanch* of Makku *van panchayat*, the scarcity of firewood and fodder is increasing conflicts over forests to such an extent that women have started resorting to physical fights among themselves. He had encouraged the village women to enclose patches of communal *gram panchayat* land for meeting their needs, while also saving it from encroachment by the elite. Both he and the women faced a lot resistance from powerful vested interests and husbands who had to do housework while women patrolled. However, effective protection by the women had led to dramatic regeneration of the women's forests/*mahila bans* (Bhatt, 1999).

In Bareth village, which also has a *van panchayat*, while the men control the pine dominated *van panchayat* forest, the women

effectively manage and control the mixed species forest on the village common land closer to the village for meeting their daily requirements of fuelwood and fodder. In both Makku and Bareth, women perceived local *van panchayat* councils as the domain of men. *Panchayat* forests were also far from the villages, and therefore not convenient for daily fuelwood and fodder collection. The formal and informal CFM arrangements here complemented each other, with the women occupying informally carved out spaces. They could access such space with the mediation of the *gram panchayat* without having to deal with cumbersome bureaucratic procedures. In Arakot village, the Mahila Mangal Dal had been protecting the village *soyam* land for the past 20 years, paying a guard with voluntary contributions. In Naurakh and Resal, civil land was being protected by individual families through private enclosures, with day to day management under the women's control. Officially viewed as 'encroachment' on government lands, such informal systems are fairly widespread owing to their low transaction costs (S. Singh, 1997a).

Women Appropriating Space within Van Panchayats

Till the 1970s, *van panchayat* councils seem to have been almost exclusively male due to the traditional exclusion of women from community institutions. The Chipko Movement for the first time drew women out from their homes, exposing them to a new world of assertion and articulation of their demands. The movement also had a significant impact on traditional gender relations, with the men accepting women's participation in non-domestic affairs, particularly those related to management of forest resources. The subsequent period has also seen specific government policies promoting women's participation in forest management, including the promotion of women's representation in *van panchayat* councils. Our case studies included one case where government officials had compelled a woman to get elected as a *van panchayat sarpanch* (in Bareth village) simply on the grounds of it being government policy. In the absence of any capacity building support or previous exposure to such a role, her forced election to the position of *sarpanch* was a disaster. She resigned within a month.

In two other cases, however, women had appropriated space for themselves within their respective *van panchayats* to have a decisive

say in their day to day functioning. In the case of Pakhi *van panchayat*, the Mahila Mangal Dal had gained informal control over the *van panchayat*, whereas in the case of Dungri Chopra *van panchayat*, the women had succeeded in getting an all-women *van panchayat* council elected. Pakhi *van panchayat* was subsequently brought under VFJM under the ongoing World Bank funded forestry project. We now examine how the women appropriated space for themselves in the two *van panchayats*, and their functioning under the women's leadership.

Pakhi *van panchayat* (Gairola, 1999b) was formed in 1958. It lies in Chamoli district, in the vicinity of Gopeshwar from where Chandi Prasad Bhatt spearheaded the Chipko Movement in the early 1970s. The village became well known for the active participation of women and men in the movement when they stopped the felling of their forests by the forest department. Pakhi and Jalgwad, the two villages falling in the same *gram panchayat*, have a common *van panchayat*. Out of a total of about 180 households, only eight are scheduled castes and the rest are upper caste Hindus (Thakur or Brahmin). The *van panchayat* forest area of 240 hectares is in good condition, and contains mixed species dominated by oak and rodhodendron, with a sprinkling of deodar (blue pine). Fuelwood, fodder, animal bedding, and some non-timber forest produce, rather than cash income, are the primary benefits the villagers get from the forest. There is limited male migration from the area.

The two villages have an active Mahila Mangal Dal, whose leaders have received considerable exposure since their involvement with Chipko. The Mahila Mangal Dal continues to interact with several NGOs, participates in government sponsored camps for women, and is also a member of Himvanti, a multi-country federation of mountain women's organizations for the Hindukush Himalayan region. In 1999–2000, although the elected council had two women members, they did not participate actively in *van panchayat* meetings. Instead, the Mahila Mangal Dal as a whole influenced the *van panchayat* council by the women's collective decisions. One of the elected women *van panchayat* members had received training and marketing support from HESCO, an NGO promoting economic development in villages, and has initiated the processing of locally grown fruit into jams, pickles, and juices. This has increased the villagers' returns from fruit significantly.

Participation in the Chipko Movement had enabled the Mahila Mangal Dal to effectively wrest control over the day to day management of the village forest from the male dominated *van panchayat* council. Prior to the initiation of VFJM with the *van panchayat* in August 1999, decisions about when to open the forest for grass, leaf, and firewood collection, the rules for collection, the fines for violation, etc., were taken by the Mahila Mangal Dal and communicated to the *van panchayat sarpanch*. His primary responsibility was to publicly announce these decisions in both the villages. As no external funds were available, the women used to repair the forest boundary wall with voluntary labor. They employed a woman as forest guard, and paid her Rs 300 per month, money that was also raised through voluntary contributions. Fines were collected from those violating the protection rules by the Mahila Mangal Dal and deposited in its own account. At the time of the research, the Mahila Mangal Dal had Rs 3,100 in its account.

Women's control over forest use decisions enables them to ensure that forest product collection does not conflict with periods of heavy agricultural work. Soon after harvesting the monsoon *mandwa* crop in October, they open the forest closest to the village for grass collection. The furthest forest area is opened in December when all agricultural work is finished and women can devote most of their time to stocking up firewood and grass before the snow falls. Cutting of bushes and pruning of tree branches is undertaken from April to May.

Although pleased with having appropriated control over the village forest, the women expressed resentment over the men leaving all the forest protection work to them. They had attempted to coax the men into assisting with voluntary patrolling, but the men had refused saying that only women needed the forest. The women also reported that when outsiders came to the village, and there are many visitors due to the contacts established during Chipko, the men push the women forward to talk to them. However, when important village related decisions are made, the women are often kept in the dark. The truth of this was established with the introduction of VFJM with the *van panchayat* in August 1999. Despite the World Bank project document's emphasis on the specific targeting of women and the poor in 'participatory' forest management, neither the forest department-NGO 'spearhead team' nor the village men provided the women much information about VFJM. The men only

told them that a budget of Rs 2 million was being approved for the *van panchayat* which would be very beneficial for the village.

The sudden availability of a generous budget for the village forest, however, led to a rapid gender based shift in power and control. The same men, about whom the women had complained that they had left all forest protection work to the women, suddenly became overenthusiastic about it. Three watchmen were employed at salaries of Rs 1,000 per month, together with one watchwoman, for forest protection. After three months of working without a salary, the *sarpanch* started paying the woman Rs 200 per month. Knowing that the men were being paid Rs 1,000 per month, she refused to accept such a payment. After a lot of arguing, she was finally paid Rs 700 for the previous month's work and then laid off on the grounds that it was difficult for a woman to protect the far ends of a large forest. Similarly, the men initially monopolized wage work in the nursery. Only after strong protests by the women were some women also employed. When no funds had been available for forest development, the women were left to take care of it with voluntary labor. As soon as money came in, the women were labeled ineffective for undertaking the task.

The men too, however, were not outright winners in the subtle shifts in the balance of power and control within the village. The *van panchayat* council and *sarpanch* experienced a similar loss in local decision making control to the forest department. Maintenance of the muster roll for wage work and preparation of the monthly progress report were now undertaken by the guard or forester instead of the *sarpanch* as earlier. According to the *sarpanch*, the villagers' role in VFJM had been reduced to providing information for preparation of the microplan and working as paid labor for forestry operations. The villagers could no longer do anything on their own without prior approval of the forest staff. Neither the women nor the men were clear about the new VFJM rules or the legal agreement they were supposed to have signed. There was no copy of the agreement in the *van panchayat* records and the *sarpanch* did not have a copy of the microplan with him. He said that years of experience had made him familiar with the rules governing *van panchayats*. But he knew little about the VFJM rules.

In the words of one of the worried women, in their greed for money, the men had made a deal over their village forest with the forest department. Since our fieldwork, an all-women *van panchayat*

council has been elected in Pakhi. However, the husband of the woman *sarpanch* is the forest guard who is the joint signatory for the *van panchayat's* VFJM account with his wife. Due to this, her questioning voice related to VFJM has become muted. It is not known how this has impacted women's unity within the Mahila Mangal Dal.

Dungri Chopra *van panchayat* in Pauri Garhwal district was formed in 1939 and is the oldest *van panchayat* among our research case studies. The district has a high literacy rate combined with high rates of migration of men. Due to the men getting good jobs, their interest in managing the village forest has declined. This has left the village women with problems resulting from poor satisfaction of their biomass needs. On gaining self-confidence and getting organized under the Mahila Samakhya program, and becoming better informed about government policies for women's empowerment, they made a concerted bid to take over the management of the village forest from the disinterested men's leadership. Many men disapproved of the women's initiative, but some of the village elders encouraged the women to take over. As a consequence, around 1997–98, the village women succeeded in getting an all-women *van panchayat* council elected. The woman *sarpanch*, however, faces daunting challenges.

Today, government schemes worth millions come to the villages and there is rampant corruption. No government official visits the village without negotiating a commission in advance. In 1999, the District Rural Development Agency sanctioned Rs 60,000 for undertaking plantation in the village forest. When Dwarka Devi, the woman *sarpanch*, went to collect the first installment of Rs 30,000, the *van panchayat* inspector made her sign a receipt for the full amount but gave her only Rs 24,000. She went to Dilip Singh, an elder and former *sarpanch*, to seek advice. He told her that in future, whenever any such payment had to be collected, she should always take other women *panches* with her and, on returning to the village, place the entire amount in front of the general house to prevent anyone from suspecting her. The villagers would themselves help her work out how to deal with the situation (Gairola, 1999c).

It seems that Dwarka Devi has internalized this valuable lesson in transparent governance. It has enabled her to maintain collective responsibility for managing the village forest and to evolve coping strategies for dealing with the increasingly unsavory and dramatically changed world outside the village. The *panchayat* forest is one of the

best in the district and the women meet almost all their forest needs from it.

Rather than strengthening such transparent governance mechanisms within *van panchayats*, the VFJM being promoted under the World Bank funded forestry project assumes that misuse of funds for implementing microplans as well as the villagers' own funds can be prevented by making a forest department functionary the member secretary-cum-joint account holder of *van panchayats*. While perverting the tradition of the leadership's accountability to the general body of villagers, the arrangement has created yet another avenue for lower level forest department staff forging alliances with a class of elite village men to misappropriate microplan funds.

Women-Specific Impacts of VFJM: Livelihoods and Equality

Discussions on the merits and demerits of VFJM rules often center around the percentage share of income that villagers would get from their forests. Women forest users, however, have been driven to physically attacking other women competing for increasingly scarce fuel and fodder resources, some even resorting to suicides to end their daily drudgery (Nanda, 1999). Their priorities are to increase the direct use values of their forests. An improved quality of life and ecological security for them precedes considerations of income from sale of forest products, although additional income is never unwelcome. The project document claims to target women and the poor, but provides no analysis of how a shift in management priorities for increasing income would impact their access to requirements for daily subsistence or their work burdens. The VFJM microplans in the case studies had few provisions for supporting livestock, a critical local livelihood requirement, instead emphasizing closure of forests to grazing.

A key assumption underlying support for VFJM is that the major problem plaguing *van panchayats* is the lack of funds, and therefore the best incentive for increasing villagers' stake in forest protection is offering them attractive shares of income from the sale of forest products. Yet, a survey of 644 *van panchayats* in Ranikhet subdivision in Almora district found that as many as 433 did not have any income and only 45 could boast of a balance of at least Rs 25,000 in their

accounts (Singh and Ballabh, 1991, quoted in S. Singh, 1997b). A large number of forests had been managed well by villagers without any source of income. It has also been observed that the income of a *van panchayat* has no bearing on what the villagers consider to be a 'good' *van panchayat*. A *van panchayat* is regarded as good if it meets the needs of fuel and fodder and helps recharge water sources. Therefore, oak forests are generally preferred to pine forests even though they provide less revenue and employment (through resin tapping). In contrast, the revenue department considers those *van panchayats* to be performing better which have bigger bank balances. The World Bank forestry project subscribes to the same assumption.

The World Bank funded forestry project has provided an average of Rs 1.5–2 million for implementing a microplan in each village brought under VFJM under the project. Besides promoting inequity between neighboring villages, the sudden offer of large sums of money to selected villages with high unemployment and limited opportunities for cash incomes has led to the eruption of major conflicts to gain control over the funds. Sustainable voluntary protection, often by women's groups, has been replaced by patrols of externally funded guards. In our case study villages, selection of the paid guards was done by elite village men, providing them a new avenue for patronage. Women's groups, in particular, had been able to negotiate/assert their authority to manage civil/*soyam* lands through negotiating with their *gram panchayats*. In at least three out of 10 case studies (Pakhi, Arakot, and Chora) where VFJM was introduced, village women were actively protecting the *van panchayat/soyam* forests. In all three cases, no effort was made to build upon and strengthen the women's efforts. In Pakhi village, a poor watchwoman paid by women's voluntary contributions was replaced by four watchmen paid much higher salaries with World Bank loan funds.

While overlooking existing systems of voluntary contributions, the project demands that villagers contribute 20 percent of the microplan costs. This was collected through compulsory deductions from wages, thereby transferring the costs to those doing the wage work. The majority of these workers were women or poorer villagers. They had been forced to contribute on behalf of the whole community, often without even being aware of the deductions or why they were being paid less than the minimum wage. In none of the case study

villages had any open discussion been held on how the mandatory contribution could be shared more equally by all those theoretically gaining entitlements to the specified benefits. In Kharag Karki village, women thought they could at least take the firewood from cleaning operations as compensation for accepting lower wages, but were not permitted to do so, and this left them bitter and alienated. Organized and acutely forest-dependent women have borne disproportionate costs of (in)voluntary contributions or unpaid protection duties in order to build up *panchayat* and forest committee funds controlled by elite men and forest department staff. This situation is highlighted by recent developments in the much publicized case of the Parvera *van panchayat* which has an active woman *sarpanch*. The department had encouraged women to take up voluntary protection to build up the *van panchayat* fund with the project money available for protection. This is considered an indicator of good *panchayat* functioning under VFJM (FDUP, n.d.). However, with the transfer of a committed senior forest officer who had been taking personal interest in supporting the woman *sarpanch* and the Mahila Mangal Dal, the good performance of Parvera *van panchayat* proved short-lived. Elite village men have made a bid to appropriate control over the women's savings in the VFJM account by getting a new *van panchayat* elected in cahoots with the *van panchayat* inspector of the revenue department. The woman *sarpanch* has challenged the new election in court on the grounds that a new council cannot be elected during the five-year agreement for VFJM signed by the existing *van panchayat* with the forest department. While the old and the new *sarpanches* are fighting the battle in court, the biggest casualty has been the well protected village forest due to the disputed authority over its management (author's interview, 22 June 2001).

Conclusion

In Uttarakhand, NGOs and civil society groups have historically played a strong advocacy role. Chipko, for example, was triggered by protests led by Dasholi Gram Swaraj Mandal. Today, the NGO movement is split into different camps and factions. The vast majority have been co-opted into working as 'private service providers' for the several donor funded projects in the region, including the forestry project. Once they have accepted the project terms, they

effectively lose their critical and questioning voice. Among civil society groups perturbed by such impacts of donor funded projects, there are different subsets and worldviews. The overall impact has been that today the NGO and civil society movements have become considerably weakened with hardly any concerted public action for protecting people's forest rights. Consequently, no unified voice has been raised against the potential damage from VFJM to the region's unique institution of *van panchayat*. A large number of concerned individuals and advocacy groups, however, have been articulating such concerns at different forums (SKS, 1999; SPWD, 2000).

A series of government actions have substantially weakened the existing local forest management systems over the course of the last century. Progressive restrictions on local use of forest resources through the Forest Conservation Act, the felling ban, and recent Supreme Court judgements, combined with large-scale livelihood and resource displacement caused by expansion of the Protected Area network, are changing people's attitudes towards forests and undermining the primary incentives for CFM.

However, despite the imposition of crippling bureaucratic controls on their functioning, a large number of Uttarakhand's *van panchayats* have survived as vibrant self-governing community forestry institutions. Many diverse and informal institutional arrangements for community management of all legal categories of forest lands, several of them led by acutely forest-dependent women, co-exist with, and even within, the formal *van panchayats*. Such informal arrangements, often with the negotiated support of elected *gram panchayats*, many now headed by women, provide more accessible and flexible space for CFM by poor women and marginalized groups outside the ambit of bureaucratic procedures and controls. These formal and informal community institutions have traditionally functioned on principles of restricted participatory democracy by men. The larger context of socio-cultural transformation and change, however, is creating space for women and other marginalized groups to broaden their democratic base. Women have started asserting their rights to participate in community decision making and are defining forest use and management priorities through organized action and struggle within their households and communities.

In the name of devolution, VFJM is empowering the forest department to reassert control over both *van panchayat* forests and

civil/*soyam* lands, the only surviving village commons. Instead of revalidating the rich and diverse base of indigenous knowledge of local women and men, and the diverse management systems they have developed for supporting livelihoods and maintaining ecological services, VFJM reinforces the forest department's claim to being the monopoly holder of technical forest knowledge, despite its historical lack of experience with forest livelihoods and biodiversity conservation. Externally imposed microplanning teams are insensitive to the internal dynamics of existing self-governing institutions, and to women's ongoing struggles within them for gaining greater voice and control over livelihoods and decision making. Instead of empowering women, such top-down interventions do the opposite by disrupting and marginalizing women's own struggles and initiatives. Placing a forest department functionary inside the *van panchayats* as the joint account holder and proposed member secretary shifts institutional accountability to the forest department and away from forest users, of whom a great majority are women.

Nurturing democratic, self-governing CFM institutions requires a framework ensuring tenurial security over community forests, clear boundaries defining communal property rights, and empowerment of forest-dependent women and men within communities to make real choices for enhancing sustainable livelihoods in accordance with their gender-specific priorities. State interventions need to build upon and facilitate further gender-equal democratization of existing local initiatives and institutional arrangements. These need to take into account women's traditional lack of independent access and control over communal forest resources and decision making in forest management institutions, instead of seeking to replace them wholesale with standardized state-engineered institutional frameworks such as VFJM.

Further support for policy interventions such as VFJM, target-driven new *van panchayats*, and Eco-development Committee formation in Uttarakhand needs to be abandoned. Alternatives to these state sponsored institutional structures need to be developed through broad based consultative processes in which the least powerful and most forest-dependent, women in particular, are assured prominent opportunities for discussion and decision making.

NOTES

1. This article is based on research funded by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). I am grateful to Geeta Gairola, Tarun Joshi, other Sainion Ka Sangathan team members and Seema Bhatt for their fieldwork and to Govind Kelkar for comments and editorial inputs. The article has drawn considerably on two of my earlier papers—a draft overview paper based on the research in Uttarakhand titled 'From Right Holders to "Beneficiaries"? Community Forest Management, Van Panchayats and Village Forest Joint Management in Uttarakhand,' January 2001, and 'Disempowerment in the Name of "Participatory" Forestry? Village Forests Joint Management in Uttarakhand,' *Forests, Trees and People Newsletter* No. 44, April 2001, Uppsala, Sweden.
2. The Forest Grievances Committee for Kumaon set up in 1921 examined some 5,040 witnesses from all grades of society in British Garhwal, Almora, and Nainital.
3. In the adjoining Tehri state, non-reserve forest lands under the civil administration were called *soyam* lands.
4. In 1986, the ban was made applicable above an altitude of 2,500 m. At lower altitudes, green felling of only pine in areas specified in forest working plans is permitted (Saxena, 1995).
5. Out of 67 percent of Uttarakhand's area classified as forests, about 69 percent is reserve forest exclusively under the jurisdiction of the forest department. The rest, comprising civil/*soyam* and *van panchayat* forests, falls respectively under revenue department and *van panchayat* jurisdiction with the forest department responsible for technical supervision.

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