

Double Burden of Work, Tradition Wears Down Hill Women

by Max Martin

ALMORA, India—Mohini Devi, 40, came to Khola about 20 years back as a bride. An idyllic village in the central Himalayas, in India, Khola was then surrounded by good forest. “Getting fuelwood and grass just required a short walk,” she recalls.

Since then the forest cover has receded, and fires and over-exploitation have bared the forest’s slate-rock surface. Life has become tougher, says Mohini Devi: “Now we have to walk for an hour or more for fuelwood and we are usually fatigued.”

Women do most of the work in the villages of the Kumaon and Garhwal Himalayas, in Uttar Pradesh state. Traditionally, a hill woman’s life means back-breaking work, denial of nutritious food and lack of rest. Mohini Devi and many of her friends look older than their age.

Teenage girls often carry grass bundles weighing as much as themselves. Fuelwood bundles are heavier, each weighing 40 kg or more. “They are used to it, but still it is a strain on the backbone,” says Dr. Hari Kumar Singh, in-charge of the additional primary health centre at Panuanaula, an hour’s trek uphill from Khola. Mostly it is the men who visit the centre, even to buy medicine for women.

Many village women note that their neck, shoulder and jaws ache after they carry huge weights. Dr. R.S. Bhandari, chief medical officer in Almora, the district headquarters, notes that there is a high prevalence of backache, joint pain and physical trauma among village women.

"The work continues day and night," says Mohini Devi. "Fetching water, rearing buffaloes, sowing, weeding, harvesting... The hills demand tough work." Except for plowing, women do all the work. "In the hills that is the practice," says Gopal Ram, a village elder. Add to that the domestic chores.

In the thin strips of terraced fields, agriculture alone cannot sustain livelihood. So the hill village economy is dependent on a variety of activities—cultivation, cattle rearing, employment in cities, and some trade.

Poor and low-caste women like Mohini Devi have to work extra hard, as they have little land, and less access to natural resources. Out of over 200 households in Khola, 56 belong to poor Dalits who are outside the hierarchical caste-system, and rarely own paddy land. Neither are they allowed entry into part of the forest, illegally occupied by the high castes. They cannot use water from the *naulas* (a traditional structure built around a ground water seepage) in the high-caste areas.

Dalit men in Khola, 25 km. from Almora, are artisans, mostly on the lookout for an odd job. They make *guls* (water channels), sculpt idols and build temples and houses.

Many migrate to the plains in search of jobs. About 50 Dalit men have migrated, some with their families. "When men migrate, we end up doing their share of farm work as well," says Gangadevi, 50.

The work goes on come rain or shine. "When it rains and we get all wet, still we cut grass," says Gangadevi. "We get fever." In winters, when mountain streams freeze, grass becomes scarce and firewood demand shoots up.

Even women eight months pregnant carry grass and fetch water. Eleven days after delivery many women resume field work as usual. Some begin work even before that, according to health workers.

As if to double the misery, a local tradition prohibits butter, meat and vegetables to women for three months to one year after delivery, restricting them to a staple diet of *roti* (bread) and salt. "This traditional (dietary) practice is still prevalent, except in better educated families," notes Dr. Bhandari. Half the women who visit the centre at Panuanaula are anemic, according to Dr. Hari Kumar Singh.

Far too much work, coupled with lack of rest, nutrition and hygiene, makes women prone to illness. A prevalent illness is a post childbirth condition locally called *prasood*. Says Dr. Ambika Sharma, head of the district government hospital for women: "It is actually vaginal inflammation and discharge, coupled with backache and lower abdominal pain." She says it is "basically a nutritional problem."

The village women discreetly talk about night fever and

burning sensation of hands and legs. "Many of us suffer these symptoms," says a middle-aged woman. A study of the Almora-based NGO Sahayog, based on clinical observation of over 1,000 women, has shown that over 75 percent of them had the problem of vaginal discharge.

It could be worse. "In some cases the hard work soon after delivery has led to prolapse of the uterus," notes an auxiliary nurse and midwife (ANM) at Panuanaula. The Sahayog study in and around Almora district noted that 3 percent of the women complained of uterus prolapse, 17 percent had some uterine descent. Dr. Ambika Sharma notes that this particular problem is "much higher" in this region than that noted in the plains. She attributes it to lack of rest.

In some cases, there could be miscarriages or spontaneous abortions. A survey by Sahayog has shown that out of 328 women they studied, 95 had suffered spontaneous abortion at least once. Out of 1,678 pregnancies there were 186 spontaneous abortions.

Says Jashodhara Dasgupta, secretary of Sahayog: "Generally, women do work hard in the hills. But here they are oppressed by tradition, unlike in tribal societies, which may also be in the hills."

Kumaon and the neighbouring Garhwal region are referred to as *devabhoomi* (abode of god) because of the abundance of ancient temples. Many women are named "Devi" or goddess, but they are never considered so.

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