

Rakshasutra Movement

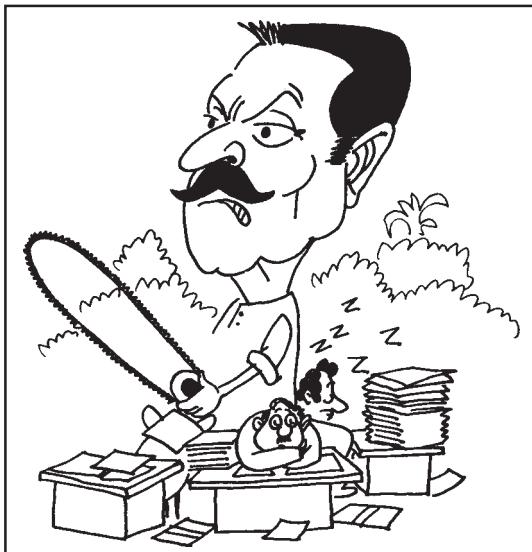
A Women's Campaign to Save Uttarakhand Forests

○ Suresh Bhai

The people of the Uttarakhand hills of Uttar Pradesh have always been at the forefront of forest protection movements. They protested the forest policy of the British that impinged on their rights. But independence brought no qualitative change as forest policies took more draconian forms with the emergence of a nexus between the forest mafia and their mentors in the political executive who saw in these hills a veritable goldmine. The relentless marauding and resultant degradation of the forests on the one hand and denial of minimum basic rights to the locals on the other triggered what is known worldwide as the Chipko movement in the late 1970s. However, the Uttar Pradesh Forest Corporation (UPFC), set-up in its wake by the state government and meant to exploit the forest wealth more scientifically, has instead emerged as an agency of marauders throwing environmental concerns and popular sentiments to the wind as the same old nexus continues to thrive.

UPFC: Working as a Trader

After the Chipko movement, the state government took upon itself the responsibility of protecting



the forests, and imposed a ban on felling of trees at a height of more than 1000 metres. In Uttarkashi-Tehri during 1993-96 extensive forest cover around Jangla near Gangotri at a height of more than 10,000 feet and Chaurangikhal and Rayala (at approximately 6,000-9,000 feet) was ravaged by conveniently setting aside all laws.

The Uttarakhand Himalayas with an area of 51,125 sq km, have a

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forest cover of 34,399 sq km. Of this 23,000 sq km is "reserved forest area" under the Forest Department. The rest is classified as civil, panchayati, municipal and private forests. The Uttar Pradesh government earns a revenue of Rs 100 crore every year from these forests.

Initially the forest corporation exploited the forests in a planned manner. Repositories for wood were established near towns and cities for fulfilling the fuel needs of the inhabitants of the region. The locals also received wood from these repositories for cremation purposes. But now the corporation is working as a trader simply felling and selling trees.

The Forest Corporation often describes green trees as dry, half broken and uprooted and marks them for felling. There are legal provisions that require senior forest officials to inspect the trees before they are marked, which is supposed to be done selectively. There are provisions for listing the number of trees of each species that are marked for felling under all the forest divisions and for compiling this data in the form of a booklet to be provided to the forest corporation. Only after this procedure is completed is the forest corporation supposed to be permitted to start its felling operations.

The rules further stipulate that during the felling operation a Forest Department official of the rank of deputy ranger or forest guard should be stationed in the area to monitor the operations and prevent illegal selling or removal of trees.

But the corporation, instead of following the guidelines, gets the branding done by employees far lower in rank. Moreover, the contractors of the corporation, in cahoots with these employees, do not brand trees properly. The seal of approval for felling trees is often obtained from representatives of local panchayats by awarding them contracts for tree felling. For example, in the Rayala forest in the Balganga range, a seal of approval was obtained from seven local village *pradhans* (village heads) to declare 2500 deodar and kail trees dry and decayed so that they could be branded for felling. It was later revealed that these *pradhans* had put their seal of approval on a statement written by the Forest Department saying that these were uprooted trees obstructing the passage to the Rayala jungles and thus needed to be cleared. In a similar fashion, a contract for tree felling in the Chaurangikhal and Vayali jungles was given to the local village chiefs. The same formula was applied in Harshil, Jangla and Tauns as well. At the local level the corporation has recognised the village chiefs as supervisors of the forest labourers. This has thus spawned a typical nexus which serves the interests of both the corporation and the local leaders turned contractors.

In Uttarkashi, several forest department personnel, including two DFOs, have been found guilty of irregularities and



Deforestation in Uttarakhand

dereliction of duty and were penalised. The corporation offered to pay Rs 1.60 crore to the forest department for its own illegal felling.

On The Path to Protect Trees

Drawing inspiration from their age-old traditions, the villagers, particularly the womenfolk, have once again come forward to launch another novel movement to save their forests and environment. Known as the *Rakshasutra* (Safety thread) movement, it has been going on in Uttarkashi and Tehri Garhwal districts of Uttarakhand for the past couple of years. Like Chipko, women villagers are the main force behind this movement.

It began in July 1995, when word spread one night that the UPFC had surreptitiously smuggled in a group of Kashmiri labourers to cut down trees in the Rayala jungles in Tehri Garhwal. Some women villagers of Khawada and Dalgaon, along with a few Sarvodaya workers, undertook an uphill trek of 15 km to prevail upon the UPFC contractor to stop cutting the

trees and leave the jungle. Sensing trouble the contractor and their labourers fled the scene. But by then three Rai trees had already been cut down and a huge pile of 40 slippers made. They had also cut down hundreds of young trees and saplings to raise a row of thatched huts for their own use. Shocked at such wanton destruction, women villagers then and there took a vow to protect the trees and in a symbolic gesture tied *Rakshasutras* around 2,500 trees.

The UPFC entered the forests on a massive scale in the Uttarakhand hills after the Uttar Pradesh government revoked the ban on felling trees above a height of 1000 metres in 1993. The forests that lie in the catchment areas of the Bhagirathi, Bhilangana and Alaknanda rivers bore the brunt of the wanton destruction as the UPFC relentlessly went about felling rare tree species like deodar, oak, fir, rhododendron, rai, murenda and kail found at a height of 6000-14000 feet in the mountains. The Rayala jungles, which fall in the Balganga and Bhilangana ranges,

were its next target. But thanks to the campaign and the strong public opinion it has created, the corporation has often been forced to stop its operations and thus forests like Rayala have been saved.

Protesting Illegal Felling

On the banks of the Jalkur river, the main tributary of the Bhagirathi, stand the forests of Chaurangikhal, Vayali and Harunta at a height of 9,000-10,000 feet. Here, a team from the Himalayan Environmental Educational Society (HEES) visiting the forests found that seven groups of labourers from the forest corporation were felling green rai, deodar and kail trees. Thousands of slippers were piled at the Chaurangikhal bus stop to be transported to Raiwala near Rishikesh. Though the women of the Jalkur valley were extremely worried about such flagrant depletion of the forests, they could not protest openly fearing retribution from local contractors who had immense influence in the area. To help the women of Chaundiat and Dhikholi villages

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gather courage, HEES workers organised them through meetings and camps. The women of these villages eventually showed great courage and went to Chaurangikhal on December 17, 1995 to tie safety threads around the trees.

A meeting was held on that very day in the Chaurangikhal forests, where the women villagers insisted that they would not let the forests be plundered any longer, come what may. The forest authorities and contractors were told in clear terms to immediately stop denudation of the forests and the Himalayas. After this the women of

Uttarkashi's Lodu Satiyali and Lwarkha villages joined the movement and took part in processions around the jungles in the thick of the snow and sleet on February 10, 1996.

Similarly, the women of Bhetiyara village in this same region went from village to village to form Save The Forest Committees. Meanwhile, a memorandum was sent to the district administration and forest authorities saying that if the plunder of the forests continued they would court arrest. Around the same time, International Women's Day was observed as Save the Forest Day by thousands of women at Dhontari village on March 8.

In Uttarkashi, two meetings were held to discuss the destruction of forests and its impact on the Himalayas, in which the representatives of various political parties, journalists and social workers took part. At these meetings the participants demanded an inquiry into the plunder of the forests. They decided to address an open appeal to members of parliament



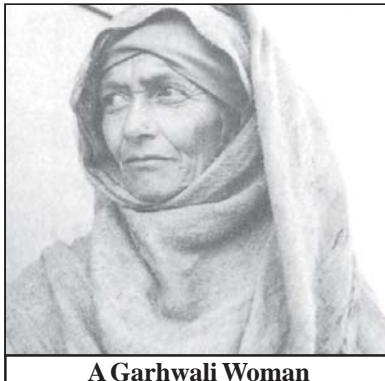
ANOOP KAMATH

to apprise them of this plunder. The appeal was sent by the Himalaya Seva Sansthan, an NGO, to the 11th Lok Sabha, which did not take any notice.

The HEES volunteers who were instrumental in saving the forests and inspiring the *Rakshasutra* movement were attacked physically and harassed on many occasions by the forest contractors and their hired hands.

In Jangla, Nelang, Karcha, Gartang, Bhukki Mukhwa, and Tharali near Gangotri, there is a ban on the felling of trees. Nevertheless, it was estimated that 30,000 cubic metres of timber wood had been cut in these forests. Here also the women of Sukhi, Jhala, Mukhwa, Tharali, Bagori and Harshil tied safety threads around the trees. Because of the pressure from the *Rakshasutra* movement, and much before an order from the Supreme Court on December 12, 1996, the commercial felling of the forests was stopped due to the people's initiative. In the inquiry conducted on the plunder of the forests in Chaurangikhali and Harshil several forest department personnel were found guilty and were suspended. In Uttarkashi, the inquiry conducted by the Union Forest and Environment Ministry, found that the chief forest officer, Garhwal, and the forest officer, Bhagirathi circle, had specified in their reports that due to the ravagement of the forests till 1996 the corporation had reported an unexpected increase in its income. The corporation, it was found, had felled 21,989 deodar and kail trees.

In yet another important development, the National Commission for Women (NCW) also voiced its concerns and



A Garhwali Woman

extended support to women in this movement to save the forests. The NCW asked the district administration and police authorities of Tehri Garhwal to cooperate with and provide adequate protection to these women as well as the NGO workers. The representatives of the NCW have also toured Tehri Garhwal twice to see whether adequate measures have been taken to check these forest mafia activities.

In short, the efforts of the women and social workers have brought some success but their demands have not received much attention from the government and their main agenda remains unfulfilled.

Their demands are:

- The forest corporation should not be given the sole right to auction trees and other forest produce. As a matter of policy, the rural women's organisations and NGOs, which are working for environmental conservation, should be involved in this process.
- The forest corporation fraudulently brands trees for felling by showing them as weak, dry and half broken when they are actually healthy and fully grown. The status of the trees in the forest should not be certified by the village

heads. Instead, certification should only be provided by a committee comprising representative of NGOs and village community leaders who are aware of and sensitive to environmental issues.

- To fulfil the needs of forest based industries for raw materials a limited section of the forest area should be set aside for tree farming and developed and exploited accordingly.
- Local administration should be made responsible for protecting women and social activists from persecution by illegal tree cutting operators.
- The responsibility for planting and the conservation of herbs and trees, medicinal plants and wild animals should be delegated to conservationist NGOs.

A New Organisation

Recently, in Tehri, a group of environmentalists, social workers and women activists initiated action programme to check the increasing tree felling activities of the forest corporation. They formed an independent watchdog group to be known as the Uttarakhand Van Adhyayan Samiti which will study the impact of forest denudation at high altitude, and provide support to all involved in the task of forest protection. The Samiti insists that the UPFC should not be allowed into the forests to engage in their commercial exploitation. Rather, villagers themselves should be given rights to manage and protect the forests from destruction.

It is only through mobilisation of the local people that the natural resources of the region will be protected and their unscrupulous commercial exploitation by vested interests ended. □