

For Legalization of Land, and Against Liquor

Women Struggle in Bindukhatta, *Terai*
(*Plains*) vis-à-vis *Pahad* (Hills)

Working Paper Series
2019/4

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Introduction

Bindukhatta in Uttarakhand, a *Terai* (lowland) region on the foothills of the Himalayas, may not be on the world map but exists as an active site of resistance and struggle, led by the marginalized peasants for more than 50 years now. The *Terai* region of Uttarakhand has witnessed an immense rebellion against the forces who have historically expropriated and exploited their natural resources/means of production obtaining cheap labour, a main cause of out-migration. Today's Bindukhatta emerges from one of the prolonged occupations in Late 1960 onwards in the low-lying Kumaon forests cleared by peasants from the hills, traditional communities, refugees, and ex-soldiers. The occupations in the *Terai* can only be understood by tracing migration of largely landless peasants from the hills. This working paper attempts at archiving marginal movements and women's participation. It traces the changing role of women in movements qua organized popular self-activity. It draws from case studies of four women, representing different phases of occupation since the 1950s, who have actively participated in reclaiming forest lands for the purposes of dwelling, cultivation, and demands to legitimate ownership (read legalization) of these lands. The movement which started against the state soon changed its phase from right to occupation (and, most importantly, cultivation) against the 'development' plans by the state to the right to assimilate in the national development debate. The narratives here in no way

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repeat the conditions and position of these women, but traces (and re-creates) history of the struggle and the changing land dynamics which in my opinion, converge at some point. The paper while drawing from the conversations, looks at the changing political subjectivity of peasant women in the hills, with greater mobility and stake in the economy, to plains where men are absorbed as labourers in the industries while retaining their control over land.

Reflection on the hill economy vis-à-vis plains aids in comprehending the changing nature of women's political action/centrality. It, therefore, becomes significant to historically place the peasant women and trace the role of women in each location with change in land pattern, forest access and productivity. Advertently so, it will touch upon the debates on land ownership, women in the hills and plains and their changing roles, while working towards unpacking the category of 'peasant women'. The dominant voices in the paper are of Tulsi Bora who is in her early 80s, a retired member of CPI-ML (Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist), Basanti Devi, a 70-year-old member of CPI-ML, 75-year-old Jamna Dao, and 80-year-old Gangotri Pathak. These voices inform us of the struggle from their period before the 90s, and post 90s. Documenting women's resistance on the question of land and the politics that has emerged from the region becomes significant to study the particularity of it within the universal process of accumulation by disrobing peasants of their means of production. The other voices include Purushottam Sharma, a Central Committee member of CPI-ML, Bindukhatta movement's leader and CPI-ML member- Bahadur Singh Jhaggi, women's rights activist from Uttarakhand Uma Bhatt, and Mahesh Joshi, activist.

Placing Uttarakhand: Land, Forests, and Liquor

The activity of communing is conducted *through* labour with other resources; it does not make a division between 'labour' and 'natural resources'. On the contrary, it is labour which creates something as a resource, and it is by resources that the collectivity of labour comes to pass.

—Peter Linebaugh¹

Mukherjee while quoting Rangan stated that it "became quite glaring during the first and second national Five-Year Plans (1951–55:

56–60, respectively), in which the benefits of development initiatives rarely benefited the Himalayan districts of undivided Uttar Pradesh. In fact, during the First Five Year Plan the region was not covered under any developmental schemes both by the centre and by the state government of Uttar Pradesh, of which it was a part earlier” (Mukherjee, 2017, 111).² While explicating the Himalayan economy, Aniket Alam postulated “Agriculture has historically been the most important component of the hill economy even though it has rarely been large enough in area, or productive enough in yield, to single-handedly sustain populations dependent on it. Only when there has been a combination of this with pastoralism, labour and trade, that there has been a minimal level of self-sufficiency in the hill economy (Alam, 2008, p. 23).³ The appropriation of the commons in the hills, has led to laws legally disrupting their livelihood and destroying their economy. Shrinking cultivable land has been a major political concern for the political parties. The British during their rule from 1815, implemented 11 land settlements. “The actual identification of wastelands and forestlands took place through the process of “settlement”, a term applied to the method of assessing the land revenue demand. Extensive land survey and settlement operations were carried out throughout the country to streamline the land revenue collection system. These operations resulted in creation of detailed village records and often demarcation of cultivated lands and wastelands/forestlands on maps” (Saigal quoted in Singh, 2013).⁴

Uttarakhand has no specific act on landed right and it has been governed by the Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition and Land Reform Act 1950 and other property rights by the Hindu Succession Act (HSA) 1956 and Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act (HSAA) 2005 (Pathak, 2017, p. 383).⁵ The Kumaon and Uttarakhand Zamindari Abolition and Land Reform Act was enacted in 1960, a dreaded law, declared all the lands as state property, dissolving the rights of gram panchayats. Commenting on the Act, Purushottam Sharma asserted, “it brought a stop to the flourishing of the *pahadi* peasantry. The fertile lands near the streams have been given away to private thermal plants and paper mills. Tehri dam alone took away 1.5 per cent of the cultivable land of the region. The unique demography of the region and land patterns amongst other factors has led to non-emergence of the big landlords largely in the hills, which has led to the resistance being always against the state,

questioning its exploitative policies and puncturing of their hill economy. This Act is expedient to provide for the acquisition of rights, title, and interest of people between the state and the tiller of the soil in certain areas of Kumaon and Garhwal divisions and for the introduction of land reform therein" (Indu Pathak, 2017, p. 387).⁶ In computation of the Agricultural Census of Uttarakhand 2010-11 data revealed "maximum holdings (73.65 per cent) are marginal and below one hectare (of land). Only 0.12 per cent holdings are large holdings (more than 10 hectares) large-size holdings in Uttarakhand are nominal. Maximum holdings are either marginal or small in size" (Indu Pathak, 2017, p. 389).⁷

Although the people in the region have always lived in either penury or bare minimum, they have always sustained their homes. Most of the movements, resultantly, have been a consistent resistance against their truncating rights over commons. Pathak (2017)⁸ while stating that state appropriation of uncultivated commons had an intensive influence on reshaping gender relations, argued that under the 1823 first revenue settlement by the British in Kumaon, "the land within the customary village boundaries has been classified in two categories: cultivated '*naap*' (measured) and uncultivated '*benaap*' (unmeasured) land. In 1893, all unmeasured 'waste' (*benaap*) lands in Kumaon were declared 'districts protected forests' under the control of district commissioners. During 1910-17, the colonial government had notified 7,500 sq. kms uncultivated commons as reserve forests and tried to take possession of forest resources. This decision severely prevented the users' rights of local people and played havoc with the customary patterns of resource use, dislocating existing agrarian practices" (Indu Pathak, 2017, p. 382).⁹

Out-migration of men in the region has been widely recognized as a contributing factor in women, pushed into drudgery, a central force in Uttarakhand. "In Uttarakhand, particularly in the hilly region, a large percentage of rural households are de facto female-headed from widowhood or male outmigration." "All mountain districts exhibit substantial decline in decadal population growth. In this condition, an increasing number of households have to depend on women, managing agricultural activities and bearing the major burden of family subsistence. Without the land title, these women face a serious livelihood disadvantage and poverty risk" (Pathak, 2017, p. 383).

Even before 1815, the East India Company had started dealing with resin for commercial use, and by 1850 the forests of *Terai* had been exploited for British ships and building construction, and after 1850 for the expansion of Indian Railways (Guha 1989; Pathak 1987 cited in Pathak, 2004, p. 29).¹⁰ During 1950 and 1969 Mukherjee observed that “the demand for timber and other produce increased at an average rate of 8 per cent per annum” (UP Forest Department 1989). She added, “The purpose was to meet the timber requirements of the industry by encouraging plantation of fast-growing species (Government of India 1976). Under the new system, the forest department discouraged extraction of all forms of small-scale commodity extraction of forest resources....” (Mukherjee, 2016, p. 113).¹¹ “Of the geographical area of Uttarakhand, representing most of the uncultivated commons, 67 per cent stands legally notified as ‘forests’” (Indu Pathak in Prem Chowdhury 381). “The reserve forest (about 69 per cent) is under the forest department; the protected forest (16.8 per cent), known as civil land in Kumaon and ‘soyam’ land in the erstwhile state of Tehri Garhwal, is under the jurisdiction of the revenue department that manages it in collaboration with elected village panchayats; and 13.6 per cent legally notified village forests are managed by elected van panchayats” (Indu Pathak in Prem Chowdhury 381).

Denouncement Through Occupation

Terai has witnessed violent blood baths and extreme repression of the landless peasants and workers, whenever they have tried to raise issues of land titles and fair wages. The region from the 13th century onwards was inhabited by Tharu and Buxa tribes in the thick forests. Since the winter is a low productivity season for the peasants for cultivation, it was only later that it became home to seasonal migrants from the hills who came down during the winter for their cattle to graze in the forests and took up non-permanent work. With railways in 1886, came ‘*Kham Vyavastha*’¹² which gave *padhaan* powers to settle a village in the plains and Kham Superintendent could allot whatever land till 1952. Owing to the Kham settlements, around 1947, Military and Civil’s retired officers amongst others had settled in *Terai* by buying land at cheap prices. (Palash Vishwas, Nainital Samachar Books: 78). With the settlement of the big industry owners, officers, etc came field labourers for their farms. The big farm owners who already bought land in *Terai* then needed labourers

from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Chota Nagpur, Madhya Pradesh, etc (names included Bollywood actor Dharmendra). "The establishment of a Post-War Reconstruction Board in January 1943, gave impetus to a plan settling people here" and scheme for settling soldiers were made (Rawat, 1993, p. 40).¹³ In *Terai* Bhabhar also such actions were taken. 1947 saw the UP government requesting the Punjab government to send their landless labourers and workers. Hence, *Terai* saw their first foreign settlers. A bigger section of people from pahad also used to come down during the winter for some wages. A place for a herd of cattle kept together. Not '*Kham Vyavastha*', but under Nehru's '*Colonization*' that only 30 per cent of refugees from Punjab and Bengal were settled. The remaining 70 per cent became farm labourers (Palash et al., 2013).¹⁴ The Zamindari Abolition Act was implemented by the Uttar Pradesh government in *Terai* in the late 1960s. The very legislation aimed at dissolving the zamindari system (very few existed in Uttarakhand) by granting ownership rights to 'tenants', created a class of landlords. The PUDR report stated that "As cultivation had started only after the settlements, the *Terai* had no history of zamindars. Leaseholders were the tenants of the government" (PUDR, 1989, p. 2),¹⁵ resulting in creation of a large mass of landless labourers in *Terai*.

In the 1958 Dhimri block incident, two trucks of burnt cycles, and three trucks of copper and brass vessels were indicators of the brutal repression by the forces and police. The ubiquitous oppression of the labourers in *Terai* led to the 1958 Dhimri Block rebellion. It was in 1958 that under the leadership of CPI 5,000 landless occupied the forest land of Dhimri Block. In September 1958, between Gularbhoj and Lal Kuan, peasants had occupied, 47 villages of landless were established and every village had 40-40 families. Within two weeks Comrade Harish Dhodiyal, Baba Ganesh Singh, Satya Prakash and Liladhar Pathak led occupation redistributed 10-acre land for each family.¹⁶ The boundary of the village was drawn. The Third Jaat Regiment, Bareilly's battalion, Rampur, Bijnor, Muradabad and Nainital Police encircled the village, as they could not witness another Telangana in the Dhimri Block. In 1968 again the lower class stretched in *Terai* when usurers started charging interest rate of Rs. 25 every month on Rs. 100 and Rs. 25 at the completion of the borrowed money. A direct war started between moneylenders and peasants, rebellious peasants claimed 32,000 *mann* rice from the fields of moneylenders, this spread to Rudrapur and Gadarpur,

with farms being as big as 800 acres to 10,000 acres which belonged to mill owners.

The Pant Nagar *hatyakand*,¹⁷ or infamously called Uttarakhand's Jallianwallah Bagh massacre in independent India, was a result of the workers striking for better wages, suppression of which became significantly important and urgent to not let the farm labourers in the big farms rebel against farm owners and government. G.B. Pant University's four sides are of privately owned principalities (Prag Farm, Khurpiya Farm, Scott Farm, etc). Hence, this mass scale of massacre is not of the University's workers only, but also of the farm labourers encircling the University. Consequently, G.B. Pant University against the peaceful protesting workers sent the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC). Since, the University is surrounded by the workers who were working in the Khurpiya farms, Prag farms, Chudamani, Hathiya, Scott farms (a few of the big farms), etc, Bahadur Singh Jhaggi believed the agitation would have spread the sentiment flaring the rage against the land struggle for inspiration.

In one of the interviews to B.C. Sharma for his thesis, active landless peasants Chandan Singh Rawat, Lakshmi Devi Jhaggi, Daulat Ram and Guman Ram told him, "From 1975 to 1980-82 we tried to occupy lands 18-20 times. And the government also repressed it. But we used to face their bulldozers which grazed our *khattas* with our sickles and axes" (17). To save themselves from the Ceilings Act, they named land in the name of their pets, workers, family members, etc. The Mangal Dev Bisharad Committee in its report explained how under the Ceilings Act, land is saved by registering it under different names and given tax exemption under many heads (16). To evade ceiling laws, most of the big farmers have bought land in the names of their relations, servants, fictitious names and at times even in the name of their pets (Khatta and Forest, 1993 97).

Terai mai virodh aur kabze punjipati kay bade farms kay khilaaf aur ceiling act kay ullanghan (violation) se nikla

(The struggle in *Terai* was against the capitalist's big farms and Ceilings Act violation)

—Bahadur Singh Jhaggi

The Bindukhatta movement is also to be seen against the violation of the Land Ceilings Act. The Mangal Dev Bisharat Committee investigation was a demand of the left from the UP government, the survey in the *Terai* showed that 3,00,000 acres of land was of the Gram Samaj and big zamindars had occupied it. Their demand became redistribution of the land to the landless and Dalits. But the rebellion of the landless peasants in the *Terai* had reflected the land struggles in Telangana. Bahadur Singh Jhaggi confers the radicality of struggle and resistance in the *Terai* in Uttarakhand from the 1950s onwards on Telangana, and justifiably so. Drawing inspiration from the nationwide Left land struggles, peasants and workers were revolting against the big farm owners who owned land in violation of the Ceilings Act and Unions' demands by the University. Most of the rebellions were brutally quelled by the state. Bahadur Singh Jhaggi was the one who in 1977 occupied forest land in Bindukhatta which was given by the Forest Department on lease to a contractor. They knew that if they turned to big farms, the corrupt state and politicians would suppress them, and the September 1980 Prayag Farm murder of two landless farm labourers is testimony to that (Bindukhatta: Kitna Sasta by Islam Hussain). Purushottam Sharma while expounding on the movement stated that the Bindukhatta struggle was a movement for land occupied by the landless and poor peasantry. The other land struggles in *Terai* of the landless farmers was for occupation and/or demonstrations against violations of the Ceilings Act and redistribution of land among the landless. It was the demand of the CPI to give the *Terai* land to the *bhoomiheen kisan* (landless peasants) of pahad and *Terai* must get land here which is when the struggle started. Bahadur Singh Jhaggi remembered that in 1961-62 their forefathers also started the demand for the land, but only got assurances from G.B. Pant and N.D. Tiwari. In 1973-74 again the *bhoomi sangharsh* (land struggle) was started by them. People had taken over around 7,000 acres of 'Reserved Forest' land by 1980, called Bindukhatta (PUDR, 1989).¹⁸ More on the women's struggle in Bindukhatta, and their changing political subjectivity will be unfurled through interviews of the active voices in the movement.

Tulsi Bora was her 7th or 8th generation of the Jhaggi caste in Bindukhatta, who survived on the trade of mats, cots and ropes made out of grasses called *bindu* and *padera*, "*Phina Udyog*" (Phina Industry). Her father was a poor farm-labourer, while rest of the

family worked with '*bindu*' and *padera* grass, found in the region in abundance then, now extinct, to be sold in the nearest township of Haldwani. While their traditional industry was killed, no state scheme worked towards their 'development'. The entire family of nine joined their father during the paddy harvesting season in the big farms in the region. While being in the production process, her exposure to the market was limited. This reduced her father's burden as she says '*Bubu ka wazan kam hota tha*' (father felt less burdened). She remembered how during the harvesting season her slumber while on the fields in noon, would invite thrashes from her mother, and they would straighten up to work again. The forest officials never allowed the *khattas* to expand and often extracted money, apart from the fines, tax on their occupation and grazing fee they paid to them. The pervasive threat from the forest department never allowed them to take up agriculture or access trees. She said that the forest officials would not even let them take wood for firewood, they were left with dried wood sticks to prepare food. "In 1868, the forests were first placed under the control of the officers of the Forest Department, but it was not till September 5, 1877, that the forests were gazetted as government forests, and the reserves of the forest division were formally demarcated. With the exception of the occupancy rights on zamindari villages, the government maintained its full rights to forest produce over the whole of Tarai and Bhabhar" (Sharma, 1993-94, p. 34).¹⁹ Even the water was drawn from the spring, after burrowing and using cloth as a strainer, she complained. Her exposure to organized politics came through her elder brother, Paan Singh Jhaggi who was in the CPI because of the repression they faced regularly. She remembered how once Paan Singh was arrested by forest officials because he had gone to swim in the river, he was only released later. She was part of the then organized *dharna* outside the police station. She later joined the CPI-ML over-ground party Indian People's Front (IPF) with her younger brother Bahadur Singh Jhaggi. Bahadur Singh, being a native *khatta* dweller, became the face of the movement later.

Tulsi's husband died in 1995, retired now, she worked as a cleaner in one of the private schools in Haldwani. She jested '*shaadi nahi barbaadi hui*' (getting married was a waste). She had shifted to Uddham Singh Nagar²⁰ and gave up party work. Her withdrawal came not because of her marriage but because of domestic duties after marriage, tying her to her house doing household chores.

Her husband was a ploughman in one of the big farms. She does not remember when she left active politics. After her marriage, her husband's family never stopped her from going to *dharnas* and protests, as she assured '*gharwaalo ne bola sangharsh karo, ladaai mai shaamil ho*' (My in-laws encouraged me to join the struggle and fight). She noted that the three communities Khatri, Jina and Jhaggi have lived in *khattas* for generations, staking a claim in the movement as one of the first settlers who occupied forest land. She used to join all the rallies, gheraos, and dharnas, but nothing more to it ever. She clearly remembers how they expanded their cause of Bindukhatta and claim to their lands by rallying to the cities. People, and mostly women, left at the fields, often organized themselves during attacks by the forest officials. They would flare up their *khattas* and their belongings, ravaged their fields and used elephants to raze down their crops and *khattas*. Although they were always on-guard for such events, whistling as a tactic was a way to collect people when they attacked. Spread over huge plains, there was generally a longer distance between *khattas* as people cleared forest land wherever they found suitable. The information would reach everyone. However, there were cases of officials attacking individual women in the houses like her mother and sister-in-law who lay on the ground to not let them destroy their water spring. The women were not only vulnerable inside, but also in jungles.

Once, while narrating an incident of her childhood, there were no proper rains and crops of the peasants suffered immensely. She had taken her buffaloes to the jungle for grazing. While plucking the leaves from a *kusum* tree, a forest department official with a rifle threatened to shoot her. She said, '*Mujhe dara raha tha, maine bola use main bas lakdi le rahi thi, ped nahi kaat rahi thi*' (I was taking the leaves of the tree and not wood) and urinated over him when a dialogue did not stop him. She later took off her sari and tied him to the tree with his gun and ran back. This was not a tactic employed by only her, but women who were caught alone by the officials accessing forest produce, she said, '*Sabhi auraton ne yahi karna thehra, junglaat wale tab hi aate the jab aadmi nahi rehte the*' (All the peasant women used the same tactics). It was also clear how uncommon it was for women in *khattas* to have such encounters, and hence were adopting organized semi-militant action during demolitions together and alone. Movement often saw women counter attacking with sickles at the officials with bulldozers. They

would always have their sickles tied to their waist. Women in the hills are known to even sleep with their sickles as they are alone and keep it for their protection against animals and thugs.²¹

Tulsi Bora's withdrawal was not because of her marriage but due to a shift in her work, which now included working at home. With scattered patches of field, the work in the hills has always been possible owing to the community working together. This disruption in the old method of women from the community working together was replaced by feasibility of women working in their own fields which were attached to the house. Many poor people saw the possibility of selling their cleared patch against some money, and moved. Although several men were still farming, with time as the men became shop owners and waged workers at the factory and women worked on the field and home, a surplus generated which led to men not only surviving with it, but also profited. This led to peasants employing field labourers for most of the work, along with women assisting them.

Her experience speaks of the 'age of struggle' where they gathered in huge numbers for a big call, walked through and survived on stale chapattis and Himalayan salt stones with them, as she said, '*saari Dilli laal hoti thi*' (the whole of Delhi would turn red in rallies). In those days, entire families with children used to join, leaving only the old to care for the cattle. But these were rare occurrences, as she would end up being restricted by her 'responsibilities. The political agency was restricted by the very nature of their roles in the plains. This also restricted their mobility and their access to social/public spaces. The cattle which were taken to pastures with other women and children in the hills, are now either grown during low seasons or brought from the market.

Gangotri Pathak was not associated with the left parties, but had stood besides its cadres in many struggles. As she said, "*Ab sochna kya tha, marenge toh inke saath hi, bachenge toh inke saath hi*" (What was needed to be considered, either we die together or win together) about IPF. She was a young widow when she alone occupied her tract of land in Bindukhatta in the 1980s, clearing it everyday, leaving her two very young children at her mother's in *Shantipuri*.²² Gangotri Pathak was not one of those traditional traders of bindu and padera grass like Jhaggi's but an occupant from the hills. She says "*yaha khatta nahi tha, kabza tha*" (This land

was occupied, not old *khatta*). She along with her husband was a waged farm labourer in the plains, finding it hard to survive without land in the plains. After her husband died, she occupied an acre of land. As the production grew in years to come, she gave up working as a waged farm labourer. She could survive without her having to 'work'. On the attacks by the officials, she revealed how the moment she would start cooking, forest officials would appear and take away pots and vessels while tearing down her *khatta*. She clearly remembers her days of struggle when without a husband, she would wait endlessly in the dark night without electricity guarding her occupied tract, so the forest officials did not remove her from the forest land. An equally frightful danger was of wild animals, especially a tiger.

Uma Bhatt during a personal interview argued that the women in the hills have always toiled outside their domestic spheres and the society had a clear division of work between the sexes. For wood, men cut the trunks of trees while women collected smaller wood sticks and carried them back, for cultivation, while women sowed, men ploughed the land. Owing to their nature of work, there was never a culture of *purdah* and they spoke unflinchingly about land, water, jungle, farming in the meetings and *pradarshans*. The native castes like *Khas Samaj*²³ had greater sexual freedom for women, allowing widows to marry, could divorce, had no concept of dowry and also controlled the land. One of Gangotri's ordeals was a missing husband, a very important contributor for production in peasantry, as she often said during the interviews and cried, "*mera koi nahi thehra, maine kaise sab akele kia hai, haathon se khoon nikal jata tha*" (I had nobody for help, only I know how I managed, my hands would bleed with work). Fighting alone to protect her land, her desperation and exhaustion level had come to the point wherein she once caught hold of a senior police official who along with his force had started a drive of officials burning down *khattas*. She later set fire to the tail of an elephant so as not to let the police demolish their homes and fields.

She starkly juxtaposed hills and plains, emphasizing that an onerous day of work in the hills would not yield what these plain fields do. She said, "*yaha toh thodi bhi zameen ho toh guzara nikal jata hai*" (Cultivation is sufficient even on a small tract of land, so they sustain). On her migration from hills, she said, "*Pahado mai toh kya zameen thehri, kuch tha hi nahi. Dhaan (paddy) aur madua (regional*

grain) ugaate the. Waha khaane peene ki pareshaani thi, kuch nahi milta tha khaane ko" (There's no land in the hills, we grew rice and regional grain, food was scarce).

She had occupied about an acre of land, much less in those times since she was a single woman. She mentioned that in one of the attacks from the police, after they gathered after the whistle, all the men ran to the forests while the women fought the police with their sickles and sticks. She was also part of the 'dairy movement' that happened demanding a dairy in the village for local women to sell milk and get fair rates. She recalls with pride, "*yaha ki doodh dairy mai sabse pehle mera doodh pohoncha tha*" (My milk was sent for collection first to this milk dairy). While talking about the political mobilization in the village and role of women in the late 70s, she said, "*Pehle aurate kaha hoti thi itni, jab vaar hota tha tab sabhi aurate dairaati leke pohoch aati thi ek seeti pe*" (Earlier in the hills women were never as so active with the party, politics or protests, but always arrived with their sickles when needed). It is to be noted that "before 1948, people in Bindu Khatta used to migrate to the hills during the summer, but with the formation of the Lalkuan Milk Society in the same year, the practice was discontinued (at large) (Rawat, 199, pp. 46-47).²⁴ Here, it is important to see that the women were not organized as peasants by the party, and were not mostly with the party as a cadre. The husbands were understood to be messengers for the women. But the tendency to self-organize and assume a militant role existed in rural women from the hills. She lamented that although she struggled against the police and forest officials, she was left behind because she could not speak properly (read politically). She was not part of any of the later struggles for electricity, ration cards, roads, and public hospitals. As mentioned by Tulsi Bora, Gangotri too could not be active in the left politics because she was tied to the land and home. She said, "*baccho aur khait k kaaran nahi ja paai*" (I could not work because of my crops and children). She also added that only people who had no animals could attend bigger rallies in Lucknow, Delhi, etc, "*mai khaiti baadhi mai hi reh gai*" (my field never left me). She added that she used to attend meetings and rallies till they happened within the village, but when rallies went outside, she could not leave her young children as a farmer without a partner, an excruciatingly painful life in Uttarakhand.

She has a *pakka* house now and one-acre land on which she farms, and sometimes employs farm labourers. She migrated with her husband and children in the mid-1970s to the plains because of no proper cultivation and increasing abuse from her husband's family, especially her mother-in-law. She laments the loss of farming, "*ab toh दौराती पकड़नी भी नहीं आती*" (They don't know how to lift a sickle), as her two sons work in the factory and army.

Jamna Dao came to Bindukhatta from a village in Bageshwar district in 1985-86, about which she said, "*humare गाँव का सफाया हो गया है, सब आ गये नीचे*" (our village is ravaged, everybody had come down). When she arrived, the population count was around 35,000 families, now there are around 60-70,000. In jest, she said, that nobody used to do a population count, "who cared about us?" Jamna and her husband heard about occupation in *Terai* from a relative who suggested that they move first to Bindukhatta and if feasible, get the remaining villagers. She recalled how difficult it was to do agriculture in the hills, with scattered land on hills and valleys. She said the people who were not from the *pahad* could never understand the drudgery of a farmer who also works in the house without a husband. She reiterated that the crop was only enough for consumption for the household, and never for sale. In fact, they started buying some rice from other villages/market. Men and women initially worked together from a few households, one's field at a time from sowing to harvesting the crop, just as they did in the hills. Men used to work with shovels and machines and ploughed the land, while women sowed the seeds. Since women did not know how to work with the machines on the plains, she stated as a fact "*auratein kahan karti hai yeh*" (women never do it). She said people from the plains go to the hills with their big cars and money, but the people who live there are in abject poverty. She added, that the whole of Bageshwar and Almora²⁵ are filled with people from *Terai*. They have opened shops, and we can never compete with them in the towns. While people from *Terai* get pure water and air. They bought our lands and we became watchmen in their cottages, their servants. She continued that they would get roads to their houses, and water in their homes, while jungles would be cleared for them.

While remembering her political times, she complained of the people who have recently arrived and do not understand the significance of the struggle the party has undergone to establish

Bindukhatta. She mentioned how brutal the police was with PAC being sent, destroying their crops, frequently burning their houses and extracting money from them. They gathered through the incessant whistling as an alarm system, resulting in hordes of women with their weapons, a sickle. Now, she believed, nobody pays attention to the party. They had gone to Delhi, Lucknow and Nainital demanding ration cards, electricity, schools, and hospitals and won these movements, while people only decide between Congress and BJP. Back then people called them, as she said, '*Cheen ki party*' or Maoist party. During her active days in the party, she observed that initially she would attend rallies and meetings when her cattle were not milking and sometimes when her sister-in-law was available to help. That was the period she would labour slightly less and have time to join the party, and later only her husband, as she said, "*bandhan thehra tab*" (now I am restricted).

The struggle demanding ration cards by the people started in 1984-85 under the leadership of CPI-ML. The whole leadership was put behind the bars by the government, while tear gas shells were thrown at women and were beaten by the police. In 1986-87 they won the fight, when they got their ration cards. One of the recent struggles was of Bindukhatta turning into a municipality overnight by Congress, contrary to their demands of declaring it as a revenue village in 2015. Land title in forest land occupation was an obstacle to people mortgaging their land for a small loan against it or even to sell it. This led to a demand for land to be declared as a revenue village, with a slogan "*khait humara paid humara!*" which meant ownership of not only their homes, but fields, trees and tax-free cattle and its produce. Formation of Bindukhatta into a *Nagar Palika* (municipality) would have meant taxes on the cattle they possessed; circle rates applied with money needed to get the land 'free hold' and probably cease agriculture. Jamna also believed that a declaration of revenue village would mean all the government schemes would be implemented and they would get '*malikana haq*' (ownership of the land). Before rejecting *nagar palika* in 2015, they had previously even rejected the proposal to turn the area into '*van gaon*' or forest village which gives all the control to the forest department and not government. Stating her disagreement, she said, they would not have been allowed to make *pakka* houses, had it been under the forest department. On being asked if the party has thought about who will get the land 'patta' and how will the

land be distributed after they have won the struggle, she affirmed that the land is always named after the man of the family, "*woh toh haq aadmi ka hota hai*" (That is the right of the man). But she also added, that in case the man dies, the land goes to the wife and not the children.

Speaking about the role women played in the struggle, Jamna noted that women were always an active part of rallies, gheraos, *dharnas*, etc with banners of the party in the front tactfully. While skirmishes with police in the protests or rallies, have been with women like the '*Rajaswa Gaon*' or revenue village struggle. She said that back then women's cadres were not involved in the underground work, as they were to look after the fields, animals and children. Hence, a whole timer could only be a man and not a woman. She said that for women to become leaders or active mobilizers, one had to have time to spare enough on roads and villages. The women never had it with them, especially not with 'cattle, land and children'. From the time Jamna joined the party and the movement, she believes that the party has achieved many things like ration cards, voter Ids, roads, and schools, as she mentioned "*koi bhi cheez mili nahi hai iss sarkaar se, sab chheeni hai*" (We never 'got' anything, but had to snatch it).

On meeting her first, Basanti Devi's granddaughter of seven welcomed them with "laal salaam". Basanti is an active CPIML member in Bindukhatta. She was one of the recent past settlers of the 1990s who did not occupy but 'bought' the land. Her husband is an ex-soldier who settled, but contrary to the general belief, she said, that Congress has never settled us here, each soldier here has bought (meaning paid for) the land. She is of those migrants who witnessed a speedy deterioration of the lives in the hills and their resources further being denied to them. Seeing much worse conditions of the hills in the recent past, she said, "*Koi nahin reh gya upar ab, sab bhaag aaye*" (nobody is left in the hills, everybody has run away). While remembering her life up in hills, she said, "*auraton ki toh raat bhi apni nahi*" (even the nights do not belong to women). Recalling the experience of other women, she said, that the plains have been feasible to grow amply for them to survive, farming had become difficult. It becomes difficult, as she added, especially when the men are destroyed with liquor, and for hours on end there is absolute drudgery. She goes on to remember how she would leave early in the morning and return only in the evening

from the fields and pastures. From preparing food for grinding wheat in the stone mill and other domestic chores, evening runs into late night and the day ends. Basanti joined the party in that phase of the movement when demands had shifted from not just occupation, but legitimacy of the state through demands for roads, electricity, ration cards, milk dairy and revenue village. Fighting legal battles, she has been part of these movements. During the milk dairy movement, she was slapped with a case charging her of destroying public property, which were false allegations as she said. In 1999-2000 she had organized women, demanding a milk dairy in Bindukhatta with. In the later struggle under the banner of the Akhil Bharatiya Kisan Mahasabha for an increase in the rate of milk, allegations of blockading were made.

On revenue village demand, she said, that they have land and they grow crop, they rear their cattle and produce milk like any peasant, these places are villages which have their own *gram sabha* and not a municipality. Basanti said, "*raato raat order aake nagar palika ban gai*" (overnight they declared a municipality), talking about the assurance that the then Chief Minister of the state gave in a meeting to the protesters in Dehradun. With pride she mentioned that never in the history of Uttarakhand has any government rolled back their declared municipality because of the rebellion, even after announcing the budget. Bindukhatta's candidatures' fights for and votes in the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections. This loss has been insurmountable for CPIML which do not have the gram sabha and thus the lowest unit of democracy missing for a stable and firm political base. Their performance in the Nainital district has been plummeting. The party which has been fighting for the poor in Bindukhatta does not get votes, as people believe they cannot form a government at the national level, and hence their demands would never reach above, a waste of vote.

Basanti, who had recently come down from the hills, was famous for having an undaunted spirit to fight the police. Since, she had a raw and rugged touch in her speech, she was eventually tamed by the party. Basanti Devi was one of the fierce speakers in any of the rallies and was often invited to speak. But, more than that she was an active mobilizer amongst the women, meeting and organizing them to direct action. She believed that the sexual exploitation of women, domestic abuse, and alcohol consumption by men are equally political questions, to be raised through the party. Her

famous incidents of altercation with police includes an SHO being beaten with slippers and his clothes torn by her publicly. Such actions often left her party comrades shocked and suggested that she stops direct confrontation with the police. To Pal Singh, a senior party member, she resisted "*ab aise hi karna padega, bhaad mai gya tumhara saath, mai akele hi ladungi*" (To hell with your support, I am going to fight him alone). None of the parties raised these issues while our party stood with the oppressed women. Being a popular face amongst the women for her active role in raising their issues at village and in the party, she was a leading figure in the anti-alcohol struggle. It was in March, when old contracts end and new tenders are invited for a liquor shop. She, along with other women marched to the Forest Department where the bidding was taking place, which led to detainment of these women. Not only English liquor, but she also single-handedly raided the local shops and put them behind the bars. It was popular for women in remotest villages to lock down liquor shops. Uma Bhatt narrated an incident from the hills where an alcohol addicted husband sold seeds saved by his wife for liquor. Only when there was no growth from her field, she got to know about it. It left her shattered. The anti-alcohol movement has seen the most organic process of self-organizing amongst the rural women of the hills and the famous *Tinchari Maai*²⁶ is one of the many. The movement despite later being coordinated at regional level by the democratic forces (Uttarakhand Sangharsh Vahini in the early 1980s), has most frequently historically seen women taking direct action in an organized manner by destroying the *thekas* of alcohol and setting them up on fire while sloganeering "*Nasha Nahi Rozgaar do!*". The campaign was named such in the hills which started women joining from the remotest part of the hills, identifying the state as an 'exploitative force'. In an article titled 'Nasha Nahi Rozgaar Do', the author revealed that all the records of the hills showed almost nil consumption before 1815, apart from the Tharu, Buxa, Jaunsari, and Johari among others whose culture permitted consumption of liquor. Only in 1880, after the liquor shops opened by British, did it become accessible, still there was very little consumption. Beckett in his report 1863-73 mentioned non-prevalence of alcohol consumption. In 1822-23, total revenue from alcohol, medicines, and poppy was Rs. 534, Rs. 1,300 in 1837, Rs. 18,673 in 1872, and Rs. 29,013 in 1882, still remaining popular in the major towns" (Nainital Samachar, 2003).²⁷ Although the *aandolan* has been against

the Indian state, however, even the British imperialists had to face the ire of the women. Domestic abuse being one of the prevalent results of the dwindling economy, has always been a major cause of women agitating against liquor sale without livelihood. Not to disregard patriarchy, through this political churning, women have come to understand the causal relationship between their exploitative state and the role of the market.

On being asked why the otherwise politically charged women are not active in organized party structure, she said, that how can you expect a woman here to be politically active since the burden she has is on herself? Reposing her trust in the party work, she believed that it was only because of the *aandolan* by the party that people have so many privileges which we fought. Basanti's husband detests her being a political figure and often abuses the party. But her association with the party has been a support to her fight, as she has told the party who threatens her. She takes pride in the fact that she is more popular in the village than her husband.

To Put it Succinctly...

The village without a Gram Sabha and proprietorship, strives as culmination of left militant struggles in the plains in the 1960s and 70s, in the form of occupation of forest land and farm houses. "Uttarakhand had been home to several movements around anti-alcohol, Chipko, anti-mining and quarrying, regional autonomy, and other regionally specific lesser-known movements. Interestingly, one enduring feature of all these movements is the prominent presence of women, who, as critical social actors and leaders, have raised a wide range of questions about development, employment, access to forests, alcoholism, and more recently regional autonomy" (Gurunani, 2014, p. 69).²⁸ It must be remembered here that women in Uttarakhand are far from being a homogeneous category, their very material (geographical) location of politics differentiates them from the others, which is directly related to their degree of participation in the production process. This separation in economy and thus politics can be seen through the separation between plains and hills and its sharpening contradictions. This lens of separation further helped us to understand and trace through these narratives, changing dynamics of the movement and land demands. Most of the unrest and resistance Uttarakhand has witnessed has always

had an anti-capitalist politics as its base, from fight for commons like water, grazing lands, jungles, shrinking irrigable lands to fighting against the attack of the state on their economy which has made migration an everyday occurrence and vacant villages. Apart from the role women play in the economy, the years old process of incessant migration has increased the role of women in the production process.

The *increased* burden on women and their increasing role in the economy must not be seen as incidental but resultant of the process of large-scale migration with changing patterns of division of labour. Owing to this role, the resistance has most ferociously been fought by women in the initial period of the struggle. However, with the migration of families and destruction of the hill economy in the plains, the relations of production changes drastically. The occupation started with clearing of lands for building a house and field for cultivation. While large fertile tracts of land in *Terai* augmented their production and surplus generation, leading them to be in a position to hire farm labourers, the role of women in the system stripped them of their militant character. The women who were in control of the means of production, found themselves becoming workers on their own occupied fields. This was directly caused by the very process of *Terai* retaining the male force in the burgeoning industrial belt and absorbed them as field-labourers and workers in universities, towns and huge farms. Further on, the former's women's mobility had been restricted in *Terai* with land next to the house and men entering the market, seizing full control over production. A divide between production and reproduction develops, women being an un-waged labour relegated to domestic production while men having *control* on both. This we shall see, in the process of expropriation.

The struggle apart from many other things, demands status of revenue villages for Bindukhatta. From abrogating the state to demanding from the state, struggles of the people changed. From illegality to legality, from occupation to demanding revenue village status, the very method of resistance has changed with a seeming sense of permanence in the status of ownership. As Purushottam observed that the struggle has weakened after the State Industrial Development Corporation of Uttarakhand Limited (SIDCUL),²⁹ farm labourer has become an industrial labourer. He further added

that although the trade union is working in the SIDCUL, but the change in social composition has weakened their land struggles.

Notes

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8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Pathak, Shekhar. "Understanding Colonial and Post-Colonial Uttarakhand." *Uttarakhand: Need for a Comprehensive Eco-Strategy* (2004): 23.
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12. "Under the Kham system to promote permanent habitation of cultivators in the region land was allotted by the British on the basis of lease for three purposes: I. Gardening II. Agriculture III. Residence As a result of British policy and endeavours, Chhakhata Bhabar estate witnessed influx of hill cultivators and increased demand for land in the latter half of the 19th century" (Bhatt, Sharad. "Development of Tenancy Rights in the Chhakhata Bhabar Region of Kumaon Himalaya Under British Rule." In *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 75, pp. 603-614. Indian History Congress, 2014.)
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14. Pant Nagar Hatyakand: Satta Bandoon ki Nali Mai Behti Hai by Palash, Shekhar, Nireesh, Nainital Samachar Books, Pachees Saal ka Safar, 2003.
15. Gentlemen Farmers of the Terai, A Report on the Struggle for Land and State Repression in Nainital by the People's Union for Democratic Rights, 1989
16. Kab Tak Sehti Rahegi Terai by Palash Vishwas, Nainital Samachar Books, Pachees Saal ka Safar, 2003
17. On April 13, 1988, SDM ordered to shoot the protesting workers. One hundred and fifty workers died, more than 100 wounded, and 300 plus untraceable. PAC not only shot the protesters but also went to houses of the nearing

- farm labourers. Six bodies were found shot in Sitarganj area. The bodies were burnt in the fields. Rickshaw pullers and others helping to carry the wounded and dead were also shot. (May 1, 1978, pp. 6-7 *Nainital Samachar*)
18. Gentlemen Farmers of the *Terai*, A Report on the Struggle for Land and State Repression in Nainital by People's Union for Democratic Rights, 1989.
 19. B.C. Sharma. *Bindukhatta ki Bhoomi Samasya, 1993-94*, Kumaun University, (MA Thesis, Kumaun University)
 20. District in Uttarakhand plains region.
 21. Uma Bhatt revealed during an interview.
 22. Village in Uddham Singh Nagar.
 23. Khasa in contrast with the upper castes, (Thuljaat or land-owning Brahmin and Thuljaat Kshatriyas) never ploughed their fields due to equivalence of 'field labour' with lower castes often, hiring Khasa for working on the fields, especially ploughing, with women.
 24. Rawat, Ajay Singh. *Man and Forests: The Khatta and Gujjar Settlements of Sub-Himalayan Tarai*. Indus Publishing, 1993.
 25. Hill district in Uttarakhand.
 26. Mayank Pandey, *Nainital Samachar*, May 1-4, Ank: 18, p. 5.
 27. "Nasha Nahi Rozgaar Do". *Nainital Samachar*: Beesvi Shatabdi kay Antim Chatutharsh kay Uttarakhand ka ek Bahuyami Parichay. *Nainital Samachar* Team, (2003).
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 29. An N.D. Tiwari (erstwhile Chief Minister) initiative in 2002, promoting industries in the plains of Uttarakhand, giving numerous massive tax exemptions.

Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is a German-based foundation working in South Asia and other parts of the world on the subjects of critical social analysis and civic education.

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Department of Sociology South Asian University

The Department of Sociology at South Asian University commenced its academic programme in August 2011 by offering an MA degree programme in sociology. Since 2013, the Department also offers an MPhil/PhD programme in sociology. It hosts students and teachers from a number of South Asian countries. The Department's main strength is the diversity its students and teachers offer in terms of culture, background and multiplicity of academic approaches.

The MA programme in sociology runs through two years. The four semesters of the course offer a combination of compulsory and optional courses along with a dissertation-writing component worth 64 credits. At the end of the second semester, students select a theme of research and work with a faculty member to write a dissertation. The MPhil/PhD programme during the one-year coursework offers a combination of mandatory and optional courses worth 16 credits and a seminar paper worth 2 credits. Once the course work is over, the candidates work with a supervisor to undertake their research and write their dissertation. The Department can be accessed <http://www.sau.int/sociology.html>.

The Department also publishes a journal entitled *Society and Culture in South Asia* (with Sage Publications).

Sponsored by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung with funds of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany. This publication or parts of it can be used by others for free as long as they provide a proper reference to the original publication. The content of the publication is the sole responsibility of the partner and does not necessarily reflect a position of RLS.



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