

A forest in their backyard!

Amritadevi woke up at 4.30 and let out a sigh. It was bitterly cold and pitch dark outside. She shuddered at the thought of the long 20 km trek to collect firewood for the home. She had been doing this for the last twenty years, ever since she was sixteen. First at her parent's home, and now at her own, after she got married. But over the years, the daily walk seemed to feel like an even greater chore, as the forest seemed to be moving further and further away from her village.

She lives in the Himalayan region of Garhwal, in a small village called Makku. There are thousands of women like her who trek for several kilometres every morning - winter or summer, rain or shine, to collect firewood for their homes.

The villagers of this region depend on the forest for many of their needs. Wood from the forest is required to cook food on the *chullah* (cooking stove). It is also needed to repair their houses. Many plants used for curing diseases come from the forest. The village women also

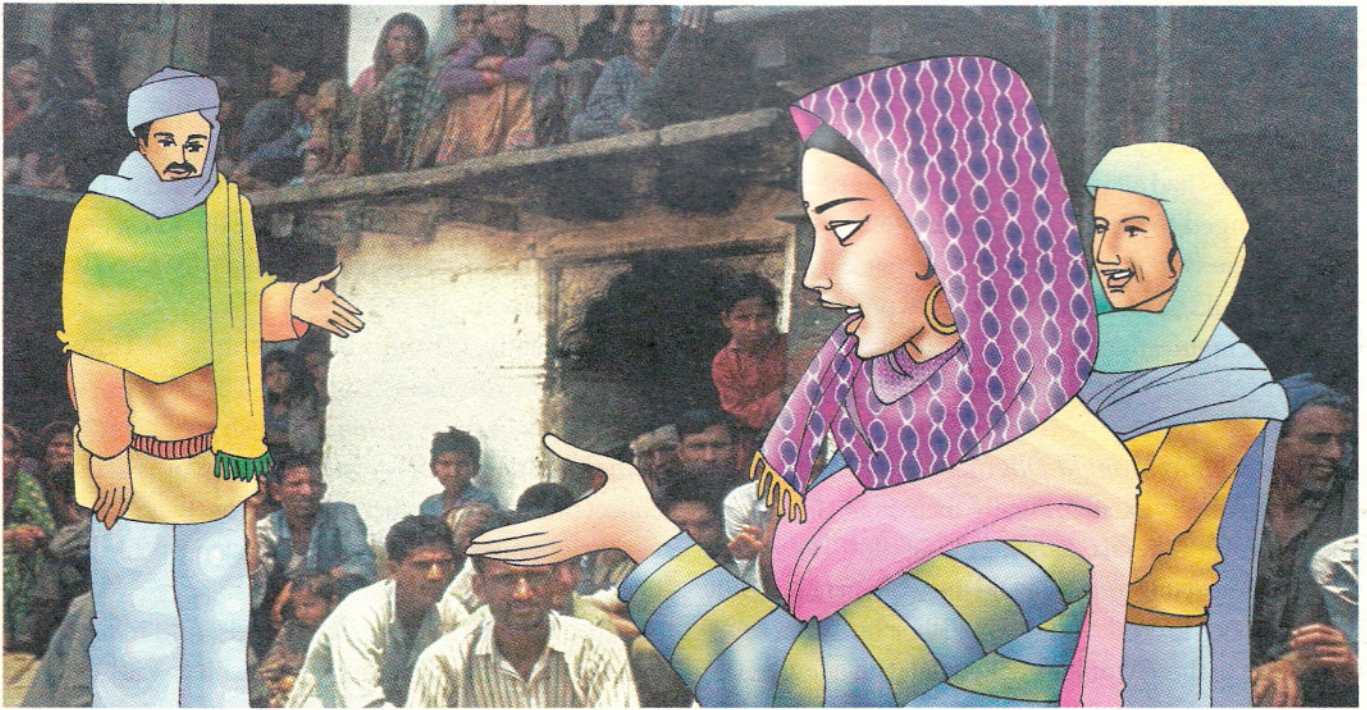
take their cattle to graze in these very forests. Life for these people is impossible without their beloved forests.

Amritadevi met up with fifteen of her friends, and all of them set off on their trek. Each was thinking about the day ahead. They would take at least four hours to climb up to the forest, collect wood and then come back. As soon as they get back, they would have to prepare the morning meal. Then wake up the children and send them to school. After this, they would help their husbands in the fields, and then take their cattle to graze in the forest. It was a hard life.

Out of the blue, Amritadevi spoke aloud: "Is there any way that we could make our life easier? Couldn't we see if there is some forestland closer to our village? We could look after this forest and get all the benefits from it, too!" This set all her friends thinking.

"How nice it would be if we didn't have to get up so early every morning and trek!" But how? Obviously they could not approach the village elders who would





point out that the village already had *Van Panchayat* forests.

Almost seventy years ago, these villagers had fought against the British and managed to convince them to get some forests for themselves. These forests were and continue to be called *Van Panchayat* forests and are even today managed by the local people. Most of the other forests in the region are under the care of by the Forest Department and the villagers are not allowed to use them for their needs. But *Van Panchayat* forests were not always close to the village. More importantly, it was the men of the village who decided how these forests should be used. All fifteen of these women understood that this was unfair. So what if the women did most of the work related to the forest? They were still not allowed to say how it should be used.

Amritadevi's chance remark really triggered off something. The women were adamant to find a solution. They decided to discuss this matter at the forthcoming meeting of their women's club, the *Mahila Mangal Dal*. Luckily, the meeting was planned for that very evening and almost fifty women from the village attended. Many of the elder women thought the idea of managing their own forests was a completely useless one. After all, had they not been trekking to far away forests for so many years? Why shouldn't the younger women continue to do the same? However, a lot of the younger women did see sense in the discussion. Finally, a number of them agreed to talk to Maithaniji, who was the head of the *Van Panchayat*.

Maithaniji was a reasonable man. He sympathised with the women and promised to think about the issue.

This is a true story. In the mid-1980s the women of Kail village (which is part of the Makku *Van Panchayat*) expressed their frustration over the use of resources from the existing *Van Panchayat* forests. At this point, the *Sarpanch* of the *Van Panchayat* encouraged the women of Kail to start protecting the degraded land next to their agricultural fields. In 1987, the women formally registered their *Mahila Mangal Dal* and have since been managing this land as their forest or '*Mahila Van*'. Since establishing this, many more *Mahila Vans* have come up in the Garhwal and Kumaon region of the State of Uttaranchal.

He met with them a few days later and gave them a suggestion. He pointed out to them that there was a lot of forestland lying right outside the village, where no big trees were found today.

The trees had all been cut down long time ago. This land belonged to the village. He suggested that if the women were willing, this land could be made available to them. It would be their responsibility to protect it. If well protected, in time the forests would reappear and could be used exclusively by the women to meet their household needs.

The *Mahila Mangal Dal* met again. Many of the women were very excited. Finally, their dream may come true. However, several others were doubtful. "How could women protect this forest?" "Did the women not already have too much to do?" "What would their husbands say?"

Some of these women backed out. But a few others were ready to take on this challenge. These women had no money. They could not hire someone to protect the forestland, as in the *Van Panchayat* forests. They decided that they would take turns in guarding 'their' forestland. Two women would guard it during the day and two during the night.

But, it was not easy. A lot of them met with opposition from their homes. Some of them were even banned by their husbands from going to guard the forest. The men did not like the extra work they had to do while the women were away! But these brave women did not give up. They worked out a plan to guard the forest and even a system of fines for anyone who entered the forest without their permission.

Gradually, saplings began to appear. They grew bigger and stronger. The women were finally paid for their efforts. A few years later, a lush green forest stood in the once degraded forestland. The women started to collect firewood and other material from there. They soon worked out rules about how much material could be taken from this forest and by whom.

Today, Amritadevi, her friends, and many other women in their village do not wake up at 4.30 a.m. and trek for several kilometres. After all, they have created, with their determination, a forest in their own backyard!

- Seema Bhatt

Courtesy: Kalpavriksh and the National Biodiversity and Strategic Action Plan