

# TO FETCH A PAIL OF WATER

## Women in the mountains

Women do more than their fair share of work within the household and on the farms. The survival and wellbeing of families is often dependent on women, but their voices are seldom heard.

**By Malini Sen**

“What dreams and desires can I have when it’s a hand-to-mouth existence? I take each day as it comes. I am grateful for one square

meal a day for the family and a dress on my daughter’s back,” says Bishnu Kumari Acharya. Bare-foot, and wearing a torn sweater which barely keeps



*Women in west Nepal gather for a festival.*

PANOS/Kunda Dixit

out the biting cold, the 34-year-old mother of seven briskly carries on with her chores.

Bishnu Kumari, who lives in Khawa village 34 km from Kathmandu, could be speaking for her sisters all across the Himalaya.

In an age where "development" is the catchword, it is difficult to perceive the real changes that have taken place in the Himalaya and Hindu Kush region over the last three decades. Studies on the status of women in the countries of the region are by and large focussed on women from the lowland and urban environments. What is scarce is data on mountain women. Especially missing is a narration of what life is like for mountain women themselves.

"What we do not know of the lives of mountain women is probably more important than what we do know," says Jeanette D Gurung of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in Kathmandu.

"There have been no mountain women writers and poets who could provide us with a legacy of literature, poetry or other documentation of their joys and sorrows – as found in the plains of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan," says Gurung who has been working with women in the mountains for over a decade.

To bring out this hidden perspective, ICIMOD conducted a survey in eight countries in the Himalayan arc from Pakistan to China during 1996-97. Eighteen women researchers (often from the same area) undertook eleven

case studies, "searching for women's voices". They covered a variety of issues of concern to themselves. The reports have been compiled in a book *Searching for Women's Voices in the Hindu Kush Himalayas*.

Not surprisingly, the study underscores the fact that women in the mountains bear the lion's share of domestic and farm responsibility, much more than their menfolk or even their counterparts in the plains. The backbreaking daily chores of carrying water, fodder and fuelwood up and down steep mountain slopes consume a large portion of a woman's time and energy.

"I wish someone would discover a novel way to carry the fodder or the fuelwood," says Bishnu Kumari with a sigh.

Though water is in natural abundance in Nepal, the hills reel under acute water scarcity and women have to travel miles for a bucket of water. The average woman in the hills spends at least a fourth of her day fetching water from sources that are getting farther and farther away as more and more natural springs dry up. "All our chores revolve around water supply," points out Bishnu Kumari.

This scarcity in a region of plenty seems like a cruel joke. Even as Bishnu Kumari trudges up and down the slopes six times daily carrying water for her household, in the valley below the blue Indrawati river flows down from the snowy mountains. But the water in the Indrawati is of little practical use to Bishnu Kumari who has to depend on the rains to irrigate her fields. If the rains fail or fall at an in-

opportune time, her crops are ruined.

"Not just water, some of my sisters in other areas have to walk for days to the nearest town for basic provisions," adds Bishnu Kumari. It is a common sight to see women – young and old – making their way along steep, rugged tracks with babies in arms, toddlers in tow, and a huge basket full of provisions on their back. It is a journey fraught with perils – landslides, wild animals and with no medical help at hand.

Male migration is another problem for women in many parts of the region. Although older men may remain home, younger and more able men venture out in search of work and are often absent for months on end. During this period women must not only put in extra effort to make up for lost hands in the fields, they must also struggle to find ways to sustain themselves and their families.

Despite the tough life, women in the mountains enjoy a better status than that accorded to most women in the plains. "As religious beliefs are less rigid here and women play a dominant role in earning a livelihood, they are allowed more freedom and can exercise decision-making power," according to Gurung. Dowry deaths and female infanticide are almost non-existent in the hills.

Anuradha Koirala, founder of *Maiti Nepal* which has done pioneering work in the fight against girl trafficking, attributes the better social status of women in the hills to the potpourri of diverse cultures – Buddhism,



***Always the woman's job - Fetching water in Tibet.***

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Hindusim and animism. "Buddhists and ethnic groups like Rais and Limbus are known to accord equal status to their women. Also mountain society is more permissive and women are not afraid to speak out," she says.

The winds of change today are sweeping over the mountains of Nepal. More and more girls are enrolled in schools. Women are working as teachers, though they still make up only 10 percent. And in each village committee, one out of five members is now a woman. With power in their hands, women in the mountains like Bishnu Kumari will hopefully be able to make their life more bearable.

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