

THE NIGHT OF THE SKIRMISH: A Fight for Mother Nature

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Having realized the vital importance of preserving the forest in which they live, the women of Hakimsinan become fiercely protective of the trees and will go to any lengths to stop indiscriminate felling. This is their commitment to, what they consider, their 'mother'—the jungle that has nourished them for centuries

It was a cold night in the month of January, the moon shining bright in the clear night sky when a voice rang out loud, "Who are you to stop us from cutting these trees? Have you breastfed these *saal* trees? Move away or else we will not let you go alive."

Lakhimoni Soren retorted, "No one can breastfeed their mother. This forest is our mother. If we have to give our lives for this mother of ours, we will."

One of the tree fellers held his cutlass close to Lakhimoni *di's* throat, tying it with the towel that she had wrapped around her neck.

Hakimsinan is a village on the fringe of a forest, located on the eastern side of Ranibandh block, in Bankura district of West Bengal. The village is mainly inhabited by Santhals and is more than 170 years old. The Santhals are followers of '*sari dharam*', meaning 'true religion'. The foundation of this religion lies embedded in these people's belief in the

The consequences of the felling were faced by the women, who were responsible for collecting firewood to prepare the day's meal for the family. The women were also unable to gather the other forest produce they could sell

nature surrounding them. The word 'sari' comes from 'sarjamda' meaning *saal* tree.

Be it a religious ceremony or social function in the village, the presence of a *saal* tree is mandatory. The women of the community, especially, are very attached to the trees because their families are dependent on the natural resources of the forest. In the village, it is the women of the house, who think about gathering firewood for preparing meals. They also use various forest produce such as *saal* leaves (leaves of *Shorea Robusta*), *kochra*, *kend* (*Diospyros Melanoxylon*), *saal daton* (twigs of *Shorea Robusta*), *mohul* (*Bassia Latifolia*), etc. They make plates, extract oil for bartering or selling in the weekly markets and earn some money for the family or even for saving up in Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

Hakimsinan witnessed the formation of the first women's SHG (Hakimsinan Mahila Swanibhor Group-1) in 2000. For the first time, the women went outside their homes and village to various trainings and interacted with people outside. According to them, it was during those trainings and discussions that

topics regarding natural resources came up.

Hiramoni *di* recalls some words from her first-ever training, which had a great impact on her and has stayed with her. "*Dada gula kotha bolte bolte bollo je gram tomader, jongol tomader, setake rokkha to tomader e korte hobe, tomra sobai ekhon onek shoktishali karon tomra r eka nei* (The trainers told us during the discussion that the village belongs to you, the forest belongs to you and you need to take up the responsibility of safeguarding it because now you all are very powerful because you are not alone)."

On their return from the training, the women discussed these words in their group. It was not that they had not witnessed the felling of trees before. However, after their group discussion regarding safeguarding their forest, this activity of felling trees made them realize the loss that they were incurring.

A major portion of a canal passed through the village of Hakimsinan. During its construction, almost all the villagers had to give away some portion of their land and that meant a loss of a lot of the

vegetation. Following this, in the successive years, there was either continuous drought or heavy rainfall, which had a negative impact on the production of crops.

For the people of Hakimsinan, the primary livelihood is agriculture; because nature did not support them, they incurred heavy losses and it became difficult for them to feed their families. For these forest-fringe areas, using forest produce for their daily use and consumption was quite normal. Gradually, the villagers began to look at the forest produce in a commercial sense. People started to cut the trees and sell the wood in nearby local markets or to timber mafias. This became a regular event.

The consequences of the felling were faced by the women, who were responsible for collecting firewood to prepare the day's meal for the family. The women were also unable to gather the other forest produce they could sell (*saal* leaves, plates, oil of *kochra* in exchange for cooking oil, salt, etc.), and earn some money to sustain their families. In terms of firewood, the women had to subsequently travel longer distances to collect the same,

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which became a part of their daily activity.

Lakhimoni di recalls “*Amader ekhane tokhon jongol bole kicchu chilona, sob boro boro gach gula kete nicchilo, diye hate bikto. Jongol pura faka hoy gechilo kono boro gach r chilona* (We did not have any dense forest around us anymore because all the big trees had been felled and sold in the weekly market. Our forest was almost empty; all the big trees had been cut).”

The women of the SHG felt very connected with the forest and were bound by this issue of protecting their natural surroundings, especially the forest. The group members shared, “*Didi, amra to jongoler moddhey theke boro hoychi, amader songsarer sob kajei jongol theke kicchu na kicchu amader lage. Jemon ghorer dorja bhangle kath ana hoy, ghor bananor jonno kath ani amra. Koto समय emon hoyche je diner por din amra boner fol khey katiyechi karon dhan bhalo hoto na. Ei jongol amader onek kicchu diyeche* (We people have grown up amidst the forest. In our everyday life, the forest plays a very important role because we use its produce in our households. When we have to make doors or have to build our homes, we take wood from the forest. We have spent

days eating only different fruits from the forest because we did not have ample paddy production that time. This forest has given us a lot).”

When the women started to talk about this in the village, the people did not pay much heed to it as though it was nothing of importance.

The unwanted felling of trees continued and the women felt helpless at one point of time. The only resort they had for themselves was their group. They again met to brainstorm as to what can be the possible way out of this situation. They then came up with the idea of approaching the Beat Officer (Motgoda Range) and discussing the issue with him. Fifteen women of the group visited the Beat Officer and shared their problem of how the forest was being degraded every day.

The Beat Officer first asked them to discuss this issue in the village once again so that the villagers know about it and can think of ways to stop the unwanted felling of trees. The women agreed and came back and shared the issue in the village; little did they realize that the tree fellers were not only from outside but also from their own village. Thus, it was very

obvious that the women did not receive a very positive reaction from the villagers. Only a few men from the village supported the women in this cause.

The struggle was not only for their resources but also for the moral principle they had connected to...that they had a responsibility towards the forest. When nobody in the village stood by them, the women of the group stood with each other. They decided to keep an eye on the forest and warn the tree fellers. During the day time, they used to take their cattle for grazing inside the forest and during the night time, the women used to keep a watch from 10 pm till 1am. They used to take their sickles, sticks and lanterns for self-protection.

During the monsoons whenever, the women got the news of any tree felling, they ran to the forest to catch hold of the culprit.

Sundari di recalls one such incident, “*Ek din jhoroner समय sokal belay didira amra khobor peyechilam je lokgula jongole gach katche. Onek didi ra khete dhan lagatechilo tokhon amra du tin jon didi grame chilam. Sunei amra kojon chutechilam jongol e, Lakhimoni di to or bhaiyer bitike kole niyei chutechilo* (One day, during the rainy season, we got the news

The men turned around and were astonished to find the women in the forest at that late hour. They became angry because it was a hindrance in their task

that people were felling trees in the forest. During that time, the members of our group were busy in their fields because it was paddy transplantation time. Only two or three women were present in the village. We did not waste any time. Immediately, on getting the news, we ran towards the forest. Lakhimoni *di* ran with her niece in her arms).”

The women caught one of the culprits red-handed. They complained to the Beat Officer about the incident. Impressed by their perseverance and commitment to saving the forest, the Beat Officer rewarded the group with a machine for stitching *saal* leaves and making plates. This was an acknowledgement of their efforts. However, according to the women this was not the ultimate justice because the forest was still not safe from the tree fellers. The women came back and continued with their vigilance; in 2005, an incident changed the whole scenario.

The women decided that they themselves would refrain from cutting wood; if they required to cut a tree, they would discuss it with a committee and seek permission before cutting a tree. Till date, they follow this rule and this applies to every individual

using forest wood. However, this rule had a long trail of struggle and sacrifice behind it.

On a Monday in January 2005, two days after the weekly market, the women got the news that a few people from their village planned to fell some trees. Six women set out for the forest to stop the felling. They took their sickles and sticks with them. The night was cold and the forest was pitch dark. The only source of light was the moon shining above. The women knew that the tree fellers would complete their task in the dark of the night. They went and started waiting at the edge of the forest, which marked the border of two villages, namely, Hakimsinan and Tungcharro. They reached the location by 1 am and waited till 3 in the morning.

They heard the sound of axes chopping the tough bark of the tree. Two men were engaged in the task and the most devastating truth for these women was that one of them was from their own village. However, there was no place for sympathy or mercy because for the women, the cause was much bigger than the people involved.

Lakhimoni *di* took the first step towards the tree fellers and the

rest followed. She shouted, “*Ei tora keno emon kore jongol take sesh korchish bolna...er por to amader jongol bole r kicchui thakbe na. Katish na bolchi* (Why are you cutting the trees and finishing the forest...soon we will have nothing called a ‘forest’ around us. Stop the cutting).”

Hearing this, the men turned around and were astonished to find the women in the forest at that late hour. They became angry because it was a hindrance in their task.

One of them replied, “*Toder mohilader kono kaj nai naki...rat birete jongole ghure bulchish. Ja ja (toder baap r swamir) jomite ja giye dhan kat ge...amader kaj korte de* (You women have nothing better to do that is the reason you are roaming about in the forest at this late hour? Go and toil and cut the paddy in your father’s and husband’s fields. Let us do our work).”

The women expected such hostility and mentally they were already prepared to face the situation. Hiramoni *di* replied, “*Tomader ke etto bar kore amra bolchi gach na katte tao tomra keno katcho? Ei jongol ta sesh hoy gele to amra kono kicchui korte parbo na* (We have requested everyone so many times to stop felling

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forest trees. Why are you still not listening? If we destroy this forest, we will not be able to do anything).”

The women tried to negotiate and make the men understand the situation. However, things were not that easy. For the men, it became a question of prestige...a loss of face in front of the women.

One of them shouted “*Ei toder etto ki re jongol bachanor jonno?? Tora ki ei saal gachgula ke buker dudh khaiyechish naki?? Ja ge nijeder songsarer kaj kor ge... amader kaje bandha didi to mere debo toder*” (Why are you women so interested in saving the forest? Have you breastfed these *saal* trees? Go and do your household chores...if you come in the way of our work, we will not let you go alive).”

The women were now hell-bent on stopping the tree fellers. They wanted to put an end to the insults, dominance and sense of failure once and for all. All of them stood close to each other; Lakhimoni *di* replied, “*Maa ke keo dhudh khawate pare? Ei jongol ta to amader mayer moto...koto ki niyechi amra ei mayer kach theke. Take rokkha korar jonno jodi ajke amader jibon jaye to jabe. Kintu ei jongoler gach amra katte debo na* (How can

somebody feed milk to a mother? This forest is like our mother... we have taken so much from this mother of ours. If in protecting this mother, we need to give up our lives, we will. But we will not let people cut trees from this forest).”

This statement was enough for the men to get a dose of the women’s commitment; they understood that these women were not going away easily. One of the men caught hold of Lakhimoni *di* by the towel she had wrapped around her neck and brought an axe near her throat in a position to hurt her.

In the meantime, the news of this situation reached the village and two or three men came to the forest to support the women. There were, in total, 10 people in the forest and Lakhimoni *di* was in the hands of one of the tree fellers. The women pulled Lakhimoni *di* from the tree feller’s grasp. Together, they warned the tree fellers.

Day was about to break and the tree fellers sensed a hint of danger. They did not want to engage with the women any more. They quickly left the forest and the women came back with the resolution of getting back to the forest authorities.

They went to the Forest Beat Officer. This time, they were determined to find a sustainable way of safeguarding their forest. They shared the incident and it was enough for the Beat Officer to understand the intensity of the situation.

When the women came back after meeting the Beat Officer, they had got the permission of levying a fine of Rs 5000 for any unwanted tree felling. There was *dhol jari* (beatings of the drum). This rule of levying fine for the unwanted tree felling was propagated in the four forest-fringed villages of Halludkanali *gram panchayat*. The tree feller with whom the women had had a confrontation was charged a fine and was warned that if he did the same again, he would be tried for the offence.

Today, the timber mafia is afraid of this group of women because they are fiercely protective of their forest and are completely fearless. Being the first women’s SHG of the area, it has witnessed many hardships. At the same time, the group members have inspired many women in their village and neighboring villages to come together and do something meaningful. The journey of self-reliance started in 2000 with one

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group and today, in 2018, there are 11 groups in the village.

Today, when these women are asked about their journey and struggle regarding safeguarding the forest, they do have a sense of satisfaction because at some level they did succeed. The result is that there is a full-grown forest near the village. However, they also have a sense of incompleteness because they have not been recognized by the Village Forest Committee yet.

The Committee does not inform them about its meetings. The women, being the fighters they are, go and sit in the meetings and keep themselves updated about the proceedings of the Committee. According to them,

“Jongol bachate amader ke keo boleni, amra nijerai bujhechilam je jongol na thakle amra thakte parbo na tai aj amader meeting e ora na dakleo amra jabo karon jongol ta to amader maa. Amra joto din achi chesta kore jabo ei maa ke rokkha korar. Amader pore amader chela meyera korbe (Nobody has asked us to save the forest. We understood that without the forest, we would not survive. So whether they call us to the meetings or not, we will attend the meetings because this forest is like our mother. For as long as we live, we will continue to protect it and after us the next generation will do the same).”

Today, there is a lot of discussion about conservation of natural resources and sustaining the

same. There are theories that define and redefine scenarios in and around. However, irrespective of all this, the women have proved that it is only how one connects with one's environment that matters—a connection that a child has with a mother, a connection that is emotional, beyond replacement and very personal. Every human being has once felt the intensity of this relationship...probably that same intensity is needed today to give a better tomorrow. The women from Hakimsinan have paved a path...we have a choice of whether we want to follow it or not.

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