

Gendered Solidarities and Activism in the Politics of Forestland: A Case Study of the Tropical Dry Forest Region of Ajodhya Pahar, Purulia in West Bengal

Suchisree Chatterjee and Sarmistha Pattanaik

Abstract

The role of women has often been ignored in the scholarship on environmental history which has focused on issues like customary rights over forests, land, or waterbodies and community led resistance to protect these rights from encroachment and appropriation by the state and the market. In a discussion on the power dynamics between an all-powerful state and the marginalised communities engaging in a struggle over forest rights or land rights, the women are often made invisible, as even the community starts to consider the focus on women's issues like inheritance or mandatory reservation for women in the Panchayats as divisive for the community and the movement. This paper tries to understand the agency of women in the politics of forestland. Based on an ethnographic study in the Ajodhya Pahar region of Purulia, West Bengal, the paper argues that women are most often conscious political actors in forestland politics and not simply 'victims' of male domination and manipulation. The paper attempts to explore the multiple strategies used by the women to negotiate a space within the larger community politics demanding the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 in the region.

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Introduction

Gender has emerged as an important component of studies on environment-based resistances when we look at the tropical dry forests of South Bengal, India, as a space for resistance, resilience, and conscious political choices. In a space like Ajodhya Pahar, dominated by forest dweller Adivasi communities like the Santhal and the Bhumij, the question of gender is invariably linked to the issue of identity and marginalisation that is faced by the community. Both Leach and Green (1997) and Agarwal (2010) have commented on the near absence of women as conscious decision-makers or actors in most of the works in Environmental History, a discipline which has produced extensive scholarship on environment-based movements of marginalised communities like the forest dwellers. The agency of women has been continuously overlooked in the ethnographic scholarship on communities engaged in activism for environmental justice or subsumed within the experiences of the community engaged in such activities. Besides reflecting the subconscious bias within the community of researchers who study the environment in terms of marginalisation, community engagement, and resistance, this is also indicative of a larger issue of the absence of women from decision-making bodies at the community level. Scholars like Krishna (2001), Agarwal (2010) or Rao (2018) have written about the everyday politics of women from forest-dwelling communities, where their presence in decision making within the community institutions depends on a wide range of factors from access to land to marital status and general acceptability within the village.

The focus of this paper is to understand the participation of women in the politics of forestland in Ajodhya Pahar of Purulia district, West Bengal. We studied instances where the women have organised to resist alcoholism in their village as well as situations where the women have spontaneously participated in an agitation against a forest official who had made derogatory comments against the Santhal community. The forest of Ajodhya Pahar has become more than a background for the daily struggles of women. It is the space where the women spend a substantial part of their day collecting firewood, Mahul fruits, grazing cattle, and traveling long distances to sell the excess firewood in the weekly markets of nearby villages – Baghmundi or Urma. The forest is a site for daily negotiation of the women with the forest guards who stop them from entering the forests, the women from the Forest Protection Committees (FPCs) from neighbouring villages, and men who are largely unsure about how to accommodate women's agency in tackling collective issues like forest land diversion or the implementation of Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006. We explore 'agency' of the forest-dwelling women by analysing the nature of their participation in activism against alienation of forest land to see how a politics of gender has negotiated space within the broader politics of forestland.

The ‘Gender’ Experience in Navigating Decentralized Forest Management

Chandra Mohanty (1984) has pointed out the shortcomings of the western feminist scholarship which mostly looks at the ‘third world women’ as ‘objects’ and ‘victims’ of patriarchal exploitation, devoid of any subjective agency or the ability to make conscious choices to navigate the limitations presented to them both by gender and other factors like caste, class or ethnicity. For a long time, even within the feminist scholarship coming from the third world countries the marginalised women like the forest dwelling Adivasi women or Dalit women were studied as passive objects of state violence and patriarchy within the community with no acknowledgment of the multitude of strategies adopted by them over time to navigate issues like land ownership and forest governance.

Historically, women have been associated with community activism on the rights to the forest or water bodies. In many of these movements like the Chipko movement in Uttarakhand, women are at the frontline of resistance. (Aggarwal 2010; Rao 2018) Proponents of eco-feminism (Shiva 1988) have cited the Chipko Movement as an example of a women-led movement, stemming from their natural concern for the environment. On the other hand, Krishna (2001a, 2001b, 2003) and Agarwal (2010) emphasize the dependence of forest dwelling women on forest resources. They rightly point out the absence of women from any decision-making body within an environmental movement even though they have actively participated in agitations against the state, often spontaneously in response to threats like land alienation which would ultimately affect the entire community.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act passed in 1992 laid down provisions for the inclusion of women in the formal institutions of self-governance through reservations in the Panchayats. Coinciding with the inception of economic liberalization in India, decentralization of governance had occurred simultaneously with economic outreach through micro-finance institutions (MFI) in rural areas whose main targets were rural women, often those from Dalit or Adivasi communities. Under a neoliberal economy MFI’s replaced the money lending *Sahukars* who were instrumental in dis-enfranchising the forest dwelling communities by trapping them in cycles of debt (Chakraborty 2008; Parthasarathy 2012). Although micro-credit programs were supposed to reach the marginalised women through Self Help Groups (SHG), Parthasarathy (2012) has pointed out how in most instances the MFI operated only for profit and the rural women were trapped in a cycle of debt much like the local moneylenders earlier. But what was different this time was that women were without the backing of the male family members to repay the high interest on time. In addition, the MFI drew the women away from ‘*traditional*’ occupations like the collection of forest products, and so these spaces were opened to the market (Parthasarathy 2012). Micro-credit programs through SHGs was one of the major economic interventions to ‘*empower*’ rural women and ‘*lift*’ them out of dependence on forests. However, despite the large number of SHGs within the forest villages, the economic autonomy of women continues to depend on their position within the family structure and customary rights given to them by virtue of their belonging to a community and not on the ‘*empowerment*’ drive of the government taking place through reservations in the formal institutions like the Panchayat or economic outreach through MFIs.

Several scholars have asserted that the inclusion of women in formal institutions like the Panchayats or the Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMC's) has often resulted in a nominal or tokenistic representation of women in natural resource management (Krishna 2001, 2003; Agarwal 2010; Rao 2018; and Elias et al 2020). Krishna (2003) has shown that in the Scheduled Areas¹, where no provision has been made for reserving seats for women in local governance, customary rights often override the mandate of gender inclusivity. Formal representation of women is absent in the forest governance institutions of the Schedule VI areas despite the society being matrilineal in many places and women often shouldering the primary economic responsibility. In fact, economic power only partially correlates with political power. Even in communities where women are directly dependent on the collection of forest products and enjoy relative economic power, their social position in village councils remains low (Agarwal 2010; Elias et al 2020). In their study of Uttar Kannada villages, Elias et al (2020) have shown that although Adivasi women enjoy greater economic autonomy as compared to Brahmin women who do not need to access the forests regularly, they have to remain subservient to upper caste men as well as the men from their own community even when they are members in JFMC. Rao (2018) has pointed out how the male members of village councils in the Santhal-dominated villages of Jharkhand feel embarrassed when women voice their opinions in the council. They feel that the women talk too much and give '*unnecessary details*'. This is startling since women are more dependent on the forests than men are.

Locating Women in the 'Politics of Forestland'

Despite decentralization introduced in forest management by programs like Joint Forest Management (JFM) which mandates representation of women in the JFMCs and has a certain number of seats reserved for Adivasi women in the villages dominated by the Adivasi community, the actual participation of women in the politics of forestland has remained low. Even when a woman is formally elected in the Panchayat or in a JFMC, the village council would inevitably look at the woman's husband or father or other male guardians if important decisions need to be taken (Elias et al 2020). This has been largely internalized by the women. Even where Adivasi women have come forward to lead mass agitations against alienation of forest rights, their presence in any formal decision-making body within a movement has remained limited (Agarwal 2010). In the Narmada Bachao Andolan, for instance, the women of the affected village would engage in household duties while men would move from village to village mobilizing others for the movement (Baviskar 1995). Despite the large number of women who have joined the left-wing extremist movements in the forestlands of central India, the Adivasi women's experiences have been documented more in terms of sexual violence they have faced from the state as opposed to stories on women leaders who have emerged from the movement or lead active mobilizations as documented by Sundar (2016) in her study. In fact, the voice of the forest dwelling women is often subsumed within the larger identity politics and assertion of the forest dwelling Adivasi communities (Rao 2018). Demands for gender equality when asserted by women are often looked down upon as discordant and divisive for the collective Adivasi movement. Gender gets primacy only under special circumstances. For instance, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (an Indian political party) supported women's inheritance of land to prevent land grab by the non-Adivasi money-

¹ Article 339 of the Constitution of India provides special provisions for the governance of areas with a preponderance of tribal/indigenous population. These areas are referred to as Scheduled Areas.

lenders. However, the same people who would support women's claim over land from a certain perspective oppose women being made the primary owners of land by pointing out that it is easier for the outsiders to manipulate women and take their land.

Despite this apparent lack of agency and stories of victimhood, women from the forest dwelling communities have followed their own strategies to navigate social sanctions imposed on them in terms of restrictions on holding property or participation in the village councils as well as the sexual division of labour to which they are expected to conform. Nilsen (2018) in his study documents how women from the Bhil Adivasi communities have led the movement to secure their rights to the forest. Collective action comes easier to women through their shared labour in the collection of firewood and cultivating the fields when the men have migrated out for work. Rao (2018) has shown multiple examples of Adivasi women strategically manoeuvring around the community inheritance laws to maintain their rights over the land cultivated by their parents even when the society has imposed sanctions on women who have tried to plough the land themselves. Often women are seen conforming to some expectations of the society only to subvert others. Diverse livelihood strategies employed by the forest dwelling women despite their apparent absence from the decision-making bodies of the village are often the result of conscious political choices than coincidence or circumstances. The following sections explore some of the actions taken by the women of Ajodhya Pahar in relation to the ongoing movement demanding the implementation of FRA in the region with a view to understand their significance as conscious political choices with implications for the future of the entire community.

The Study in Context

Ethnographic study was conducted in Ajodhya Pahar of Purulia district of West Bengal during February-April 2022 to understand the forestland politics of Ajodhya Pahar. Our study has looked at key issues like forestland diversion and lack of implementation of Forest Rights Act (2006) besides looking at identity as a determinant in the forest politics of Ajodhya Pahar. The selection of Ajodhya Pahar was based on the fact that the region has a long history of engagement with the colonial and post-colonial state system as a geographical and administrative frontier between the agrarian plains of Bengal and the forested uplands of Chotanagpur. Purulia has always acted as a gateway to Chotanagpur from the agricultural plains of the Bengal Presidency. As a border zone, Purulia has had a unique cultural history comprising elements of Hinduism, Christianity, and Sari and Sarna religions followed by the ethnic Munda and Santhal communities of the region. Recently, the region has become a hotbed of politics over the construction of dams over multiple river systems and diverting large areas of forestland to dams without following protocols of land acquisition as per the Forest Rights Act (2006). There are ongoing legal battles in the Calcutta High Court, where a stay was imposed on the upcoming Turga Pumped Storage Project (TPSP) on Turga river, a tributary of Subarnarekha in 2019, followed by a change of the judges of the Division Bench in early 2021 and a controversial verdict on 23 December 2021, which actively propagated the erosion of the power of the Gram Sabha in favour of Gram Panchayats (*WBSEDCL & Anr. vs. Rabi Besra & Ors*).

The Demography

Ajodhya Pahar comprises four blocks in the Purulia district: Baghmundi, Balarampur, Arsha, and Jhalda. For this study, three villages in the Baghmundi block were chosen. Baghmundi has a high percentage of the Scheduled Tribe population (25.10 %) mainly comprising Santhal and Bhumij Adivasi communities. It does not have an urban population. The largest population centre and the market are located at Baghmundi, a large village in the foothills of Ajodhya Pahar. Thurga and other south flowing rivers coming from Ajodhya Pahar flow through Baghmundi to join Subarnarekha, flowing through the southern part of the block. Since 2018, Ajodhya and Baghmundi Gram Panchayats have seen a growing number of protests against forestland diversion for the proposed pumped storage projects on Thurga, Bandu and Kathaljal rivers (Singh 2019).

Bhursabera (Chhatni), Barelahar, and Baruajara, the three villages selected for the study have seen increasing participation of women in politics for the implementation of FRA (2006) in Ajodhya Pahar. All three villages are inhabited by the Adivasi Santhal community. Bhursabera is also home to one of the first autonomous women's organisations in Ajodhya Pahar. Baruajara has seen increasing participation of women in the movement against the upper dam of the Purulia Pumped Storage Project (PPSP) as well as in the activism regarding the management of Bamni Falls, a popular tourist spot under Baruajara-Dulgurbera-Badghutu Gram Sabha. While Barelahar falls in the catchment of Turga river, Chhatni-Bhursabera lies near the Bandu river and Baruajara is a stone's throw from the upper dam of PPSP. All three villages are already affected or would be affected by the pumped storage projects. Besides TPSP projects on Bandu and Kathaljol rivers, projects on both tributaries of Kanghsabati are also in the pipeline. Forestland activism in all three villages is therefore to be seen in relation to largescale forestland diversion, which would affect men and women alike although the way in which they have responded to this crisis is different.

Narratives from Ajodhya Pahar

Women as Frontline Workers in Forestland Activism

Following Gramsci, Ranajit Guha (1999/ 1983) commented that peasant insurgencies led by the subaltern are never spontaneous but should be seen as a consequence of a series of conscious political choices. The aim of '*Subaltern Studies*' was to seek out the agency of the subaltern in political activism from the colonial documents which would view them as objects without political consciousness or choice. Spivak (1985) criticized Guha for overlooking women within his broad classification of the '*subaltern*' and the '*elite*' and has pointed out that the agency of the marginalised women in the third world is often lost or manipulated by the men who either claim to represent or consciously manipulate the agency of women while making political choices. We went with this understanding to explore the participation of women in the forestland politics of Ajodhya Pahar. This was substantiated by initial discussions with the women of Barelahar and Baruajara villages and even with the male activists of *Prakriti Bachao O Adivasi Bachao Mancha* (PBABM) all of whom had acknowledged that the women needed to come forward for the movement. However, they were not willing to make representation of women a mandatory requirement for forestland activism. PBABM being a newly formed collective of several Adivasi organisations did not have a concrete organisational structure at the time of the study. The only Adivasi woman leader who would visit the villages and talk to the women was Lekha, a school

teacher from Neturia block to the east of the district who was an activist of the Santhal political organisation *Bharat Zakat Majhi Pargana Mahal* (BJMPM).

The women had gathered for the first-ever celebration of the International Working Women's Day in Ajodhya Pahar organised by PBABM. Lekha would talk to women in the Santhali language about FRA (2006) and the need to organise to form a Gram Sabha. In Barujara, the women from Barujara, Badhghutu, and Dulgubera villages had gathered in an empty hut to meet Lekha, while the men sat back. The discussion was mostly between women as they talked about a range of issues including the management of Bamni Falls, protecting forests from fire, and economic self-sufficiency for women. On that day, *Sarhul*² was being celebrated in Barelahar village. Many women attended the meeting despite it being the second day of the festival. Some men also gathered around to listen to the discussion.

The discussion in Barelahar was very lively and spontaneous. Lekha could not stay for the meeting as she had to travel to Bhursabera to meet with the women of '*Banchita Nari Jagaran Mancha*'. The meeting in Barelahar was conducted by Padma, the wife of the convenor of PBABM. Padma is a homemaker. Although her husband is a well-known leader of the organisation, it was her first time attending and conducting a meeting of this scale somewhere outside of her marital village. Padma nervously went through points that she would present in the session as we took the bus from Purulia town to Ajodhya Pahar. Although Lekha was absent from the meeting, the women took to Padma as one of their own. 'After all, she was a *'bride'* from a neighbouring village, who had moved to Purulia town to be with her husband who is a school teacher there'. The meeting soon turned to spontaneous outbursts from women when Padma started to talk about the '*dikus*' or the outsiders who frequented the village to survey land for the proposed pumped storage project of Turga river.

Barelahar is closest in proximity to the catchment of the Turga river and men and women of the village are dependent on the forestland of the Turga catchment for cultivation and collection of non-timber forest products. As the men complained about the forest department harassing the villagers for carrying wood on their motorcycles, Fuli, a woman whose house was adjacent to the house where we were holding the meeting said that '*we understand that cutting wood is wrong. But sometimes we do not have any other option. This is only adding to our miseries. Now there is no forest left in Hathinada Mauza. The women there have to walk long to collect firewood*'. Indeed, when some women from Hathinada were contacted earlier, they had commented on the lack of trees in their *Mauza* (revenue village) and how they would get chased by the forest guards and the people from neighbouring JFMCs if they ventured there for wood. Due to *Sarhul*, most of the men left after a while. The meeting concluded with songs and dances as the atmosphere became considerably lighter after the men left.

Music and laughter were spontaneous in the women-only meetings of any village in Ajodhya Pahar. The women of Bhursabera, who had organised themselves to protest against alcoholism in the village had found it easier to sing when they were asked to make a speech in the '*Jangal Seba Padayatra*' rally organised by PBABM in Ajodhya Pahar in March. The women of Barelahar and

² Sarhul or Salui is one of the biggest festivals of the Santhal community in Ajodhya Pahar. The festival includes one day of worship and dancing in the sacred groves named Jaher Than(s), followed by a day of pouring water on each other almost like the Holi celebration among caste Hindus.

Baruajara, although not formally organised, had shown spontaneous resistance when faced with injustice perpetrated by the government. Around July 2022, we came to know that the men and women in Barelahar had together resisted the survey cars of West Bengal State Electricity Development Corporation Limited (WBSEDCL) accompanied by police jeeps from entering the village as they attempted to start surveying the proposed upper dam area.

Prior to visiting Ajodhya Pahar, we had information about the agitation of the women of Baruajara village demanding rights to Bamni Falls. Baruajara has an active group of young people who are well versed with the forest laws and not afraid to negotiate with the forest department about infringement of forest rights when needed. Baruajara is famous in the Ajodhya Pahar region for its movement for the custody of the Bamni Falls, a major tourist attraction in the region.

Bamni Falls used to generate significant revenue from the crowds of tourists who visited Ajodiya Buru every year during monsoon and springtime. The forest department subsequently levied entry fees on the tourists. There are small eateries and shops selling souvenirs right outside the entry point. The first of the contestations broke out in Bamni Falls regarding the management of these stalls when the Bamni Falls was mapped as a part of the Baruajara-Dulgubera-Badhghutu Gram Sabha area. The stalls at that point were managed mainly by the Mahato (OBC) villagers from Barreriya, a village in the foothills of Ajodiya Buru. The movement for Bamni Falls demanded 100% of revenue generated from the waterfalls as well as the custody of the stalls, as the waterfalls effectively fell under the proposed Gram Sabha area of Baruajara, Dulgubera, and Badhghutu villages. This led to extended periods of demonstration in front of the Forest Range Office of Baghmundi and later negotiations until the rights of these three villages over Bamni Falls were secured. However, despite agreeing that the revenue would be officially handed over to the village once the Gram Sabha was formally formed in a few days, the Forest Department scraped the system of entry tickets altogether. Although the villages had retained the right to manage the stalls, this had led to serious contestations with the Mahato villagers of Barreriya, who would seize vehicles of Baruajara residents and hand them over to the forest department allegedly for ‘smuggling’ wood out of the forests.

When one of the authors visited the village in March 2022, Baruajara had fully taken over the maintenance of Bamni Falls although their relationship with the forest department had significantly deteriorated over time. There were complaints of misbehaviour by the forest department staff including the Range Officer and the villagers had vehemently stated in a focus group discussion that community forest management systems like JFM would never work unless the department gave 100% of the revenue generated within a Gram Sabha area to the concerned FRC.

The demand for full implementation of Community Forest Rights (CFR) under FRA (2006) has only intensified in the region after the agitations over Turga Pumped Storage Project (TPSP) started. Located right beside the upper dam of the Purulia Pumped Storage Project (PPSP), Baruajara had felt the first-hand effects of deforestation of the dense forest patches between Badhghutu and Sahebdi villages when the upper dam was constructed. Elephant attacks in the village multiplied since a part of the elephant corridor was submerged under the upper dam and they were not taken into consideration before the felling started. This feeling of powerlessness created bitterness towards the Forest Department and the JFM system which transformed into anger as the department continued to show nonchalance.

The anger of the women of Baraujara against the forest department culminated in an agitation on 14 November 2022. The newly formed Gram Sabha had decided to inaugurate Bamni Falls on 14 November to commemorate the birth anniversary of Birsa Munda (a revered tribal leader). However, despite prior intimation to the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), Purulia and the District Magistrate (DM) on the day of the event, the Range Officer of Baghmundi tried to stop the program by deploying forest guards and then hurled casteist insults at the Adivasi villagers of Baraujara. It was reported that the comment led the women to agitate against the Range Officer and chase him away from the area while getting into a skirmish with the female forest guards who were hitting the villagers with *lathis*. The spontaneous agitation of the women of Baraujara is a significant example of the political consciousness of women who had not hesitated before openly moving against an upper caste man holding a position of power.

Participation of Women in the Formal Organisations

During the initial phase of activism against TPSP when the PBABM had just been formed, the number of women involved with the organisation was minimal despite women being essential stakeholders in the forest spaces because of their everyday ventures to the forests in search of non-timber forest products (NTFP) and for grazing. Over time, the authors (one of whom has stayed in Purulia) have witnessed PBABM gradually try to be more inclusive in terms of women's representation. However, the primary demands of the women in Bhursabera were centred more around navigating the structure of male domination within the village rather than a collaborative effort to resist forest land diversion.

A central problem for the women of Bhursabera was alcoholism. Alcohol consumption is common in Bhursabera both among men and women. There were multiple distilleries within the hamlet itself. *Mahul* trees are ubiquitous in Ajodhya Pahar. The making of liquors like Mahua or Tari (Toddy) was carried out within many households in the village. However, despite being normalized within the rural society of Ajodhya Pahar, alcohol consumption had also led to instances of domestic violence.

The women of Bhursabera had first organised to protest against alcoholism within the village which led to the demolition of several illegal distilleries after the intervention of the state excise department. This had created an uproar within the village. Bhursabera was a hamlet under the Chhatni revenue village. The entire village had one *Majhi Haram*, the headman and one *Naike Haram*, the spiritual head of the village. Even within Bhursabera, there are two to three neighbourhoods. Leena lived in the last house of the village bordering the fields and the forest with her husband Manotosh who was associated with the Forward Block Party and was popular in the entire region as an accomplished vet. Leena was the leader of the small group of women who had dissociated from the Chhatni SHG and formed their own association called the '*Banchita Nari Jagaran Mancha*' mostly to organise women against alcoholism in the village. The first meeting of the forum was held in 2021. It was highly popular and attended by around 100 women all over Chhatni. The first action of the forum was to appeal to the excise department to stop the illegal distilleries. However, despite its initial popularity, the forum faced steep opposition from the village council because of its involvement with the excise department. The ten women of different ages who were associated with the forum were ridiculed, heckled, and threatened by people from

the village. Their demand to be a part of the '*sholo-ana*' council was also turned down by the village council. This created some resentment among the women, especially towards the *Naike Haram*, who was also one of the chief organisers of PBABM in Ajodhya Pahar.

The forum meetings would be held in the inner courtyard of one of the member's houses to escape the suspicion and sneers from other villagers. Leena had talked about how the women were intimidated by the male members of the family to stop taking part in the forum meetings. However, sometimes she would lament that even the women would drink frequently in Bhursabera. Her 70 years old mother-in-law would remain intoxicated for hours and this irked Leena a lot. While the male village leaders pushed the forum to settle the issues within the village council without involving the excise department, the community members like Manotosh, who are associated with the parliamentary left parties like CPI-M or the Forward Block, to some extent backed the demand to raze distilleries. Sukul, the *Naike Haram* of the village, who was associated with Maoist politics during the turbulent years of Ajodhya Pahar had political differences with the activists associated with the parliamentary left, although both were part of the PBABM. Whether the opposition to alcoholism was actually arising out of the urban left influences in the region as Shah (2010) had noticed in her study of the Munda community of Jharkhand still needs to be studied.

However, the inclusion of women in the Chhatni Gram Sabha meetings was a policy decision taken by the PBABM as was the organisation of International Working Women's Day in three villages of Ajodhya Pahar on 8 March 2022. The absence of spontaneous participation of women of Bhursabera in the forest politics of Ajodhya Pahar was notable. Whereas the women were participating in large numbers and leading the struggles against the coal mines at Deucha-Pachami in the neighbouring district of Birbhum, the participation of women had seemed forced in Ajodhya Pahar except for pockets of resistance in Hingutar or Barujara villages. Even after repeated push by the leadership of the PBABM, the Chhatni Gram Sabha was at a standstill because the women's forum was not ready to negotiate on the issue of alcohol consumption.

While interacting with the women of Ajodhya Pahar, it was noticed that an element of fear, uncertainty, and lack of confidence in public speaking exists among many women when men are present. This is contrary to the freely flowing dialogue, mimicry of the village leaders and stories when the space is occupied only by women, inside Leena's or someone else's house. The home was the safe space for the women of Bhursabera. During the '*Jangal Seba Padayatra*' rally, even though the women had insisted on attending the entire program, Leena would stutter when the organisers of PBABM would thrust a microphone towards her and ask her to speak on the need to form Gram Sabha in every village of Ajodhya Pahar. While the women would be more comfortable with singing to convey their message, the male leadership would try to make them talk in public gatherings seconding the organisation's agenda. The leadership would express annoyance and irritation when the women would not come for all the protests or take up more proactive roles in forming Gram Sabha. However, it would be a simplification to conclude that the effort of PBABM to make the organisation more inclusive for women is entirely tokenistic. In the absence of a formal structure, in Bhursabera, the collective invited the participation of women in meetings separately called by the *Naike Haram* to discuss their grievances and to find a way to move forward. Despite his earlier stand where he had been irritated as women of Bhursabera had demanded to speak in the *sholo-ana* to disband the village distilleries, as the movement gained momentum even Sukul

had voluntarily shared a platform with Leena during the ‘*Jangal Seba Padayatra*’ Rally, helping her to translate an anti-addiction song from Santhali to Bengali.

The regular activists of PBABM were receptive to the idea of women joining the movement and even appreciative of it although the participation of women in decision making was abysmally low. In fact, in our frequent meetings, Upen, the convenor of PBABM had often expressed his admiration for the Adivasi woman Maoist leader Jagari, who had visited Bhursabera in the middle of a winter night carrying an infant in her arms during the days of his youth when Ajodhya Pahar had experienced left-wing extremism. However, with the abatement of Maoist politics in the region there were no more random sightings of armed women in villages in the middle of the night. Whether the Adivasi women engaging with the politics of forestland in present day Ajodhya Pahar would receive the same respect from the political activists and the village council is yet to be seen.

Studying Women as Stakeholders in the Forestland Politics of Ajodhya Pahar

The engagement of women with the politics of forestland is highly dynamic and it would be an oversimplification to study the women of Ajodhya Pahar as simple ‘*victims*’ of the male-dominated community and the state. The women in Ajodhya Pahar have been making conscious economic choices for a long time. These choices include the decision to form SHGs in several villages, receiving credit from the state in a move that is often seen as counterproductive to the resistance by the male anti-dam activists of the region.

One of the first rumours one heard about the SHGs in Ajodhya Pahar was that they were directly encouraged by the state government to mobilize the rural women in order to generate consent for the pumped storage projects by providing them with financial assistance. Women of course have seen the SHGs in a much more positive light. The women of ‘*Banchita Nari Jagaran Mancha*’ of Bhursabera had in fact been trying to get registered as a group to facilitate loans from the state since its split from the Chhatni SHG, notwithstanding the concerns about manipulation by the state government while simultaneously taking part in anti-pumped storage project activism. The field experience with the women of Ajodhya Pahar has shown them to be pragmatic where economic choices are concerned. This includes braving the JFMCs of other villages to get firewood from their plantations, avoiding forest guards where necessary, and sometimes clearing the undergrowth by lighting fire in order to facilitate the collection of Mahul. In most cases, these actions have made villains out of Santhal women to the forest department and even to political organisations like PBABM which has prioritized regulation of forest fires out of environmental concerns. The women in most cases are conscious of the ramifications of their actions, especially when it includes venturing into the territories of neighbouring JFMCs. However, they are candid in expressing their helplessness as their economic choices are getting limited due to depleting forest covers. In instances where the women do have the option to get firewood from the territory of their own JFMC, they have diligently performed the patrol duties to keep the ‘outsiders’ away from the forests. Both men and women of Barujara have been proactive to rush to control forest fires if there is an outbreak in the vicinity.

In a study of the Schedule VI areas of North Eastern India, Krishna (2001) has commented that the position of women in natural resource management is compromised in areas where customary

rights are protected by the state. Purulia is not a scheduled area. There are many JFMCs in Ajodhya Pahar region where women are proactive. However, despite the constriction of economic choices for the women of Ajodhya Pahar, their participation in direct political decision-making is limited.

PBABM as a collective of Adivasi organisations present in Ajodhya Pahar has heavily relied upon the headmanship or the '*Majhiari*' system for mobilizing its rural base. The '*Majhi Haram*' in many villages were felicitated by the PBABM during the course of the '*Jangal Seba Padajatra*'. Although many women had taken part in the rally, had diligently cooked food for the activists who would stop in their villages for meetings, and even held banners or given speeches during the program when asked for, they were not consulted to discuss important issues like the course of the movement. The women from different villages sat with their respective groups when the rally would stop at different villages unless someone like Leena was specifically asked to share experiences or address a gathering. The women did not want to get more involved with the male leaders, often feeling out of place at such gatherings. They left for their homes before nightfall to cook or tend to the children and their presence was not consistent throughout the rally. It was expected that the women would join these gatherings only after their chores like collecting Mahul fruits in the morning were over. This sexual division of labour was generally accepted.

However, despite this internalization of gender norms, notes of discord would come out when Leena would talk about how she was slighted in the *sholo-ana* meeting in Chhatni village when she wanted to talk about alcoholism, which was a secondary issue to the men. Again, sometimes women like Padma, who had more exposure through their stay in Purulia town would complain about having to stay at home all the time to take care of her children while her husband would be busy day after day with his political engagement. Generally, these dissatisfied voices were few and far between.

Despite the limited participation of women in decision making, political consciousness was decidedly present among them. From chasing the upper caste Range Officers to participating in the movement demanding rights to the Bamni falls, the women in Barujara have been noted for their strong political presence. They had been most successful in communicating with Lekha during the Women's Day event. They even met with the women leaders from the anti-coal mine protests in Deucha-Pachami who had come to show solidarity with the movement on the second day of the *Jangal Seba Padayatra*. Most importantly, the general attitude of the movement towards women was not entirely dismissive. Many male leaders from PBABM have repeatedly expressed admiration towards the women in Deucha-Pachami who at that point were staying overnight at the protest site and meeting with delegates from different organisations and collectives. In general, there was an acceptance of educated women, at least within the leadership of the movement. Most of the girl children in Bhursabera were in school and daughters of the leadership were pursuing High School or College education in places like Purulia or Kolkata. However, this admiration was decidedly more in the leadership of PBABM most of whom were educated school teachers and associated with left-wing politics to some degree during their youth. It can be said that the urban left-wing activism culture has influenced at least some of the leadership to try to make the organisation more gender inclusive.

In places like Deucha-Pachami, where the situation is highly volatile and confrontational due to direct atrocities by the state, the women had no other option but to come forward and claim their

space in the movement. In Ajodhya, the patterns of gender inclusivity are more complex. Places like Barujara, where educated young women take interest in the movement have seen greater and more spontaneous participation than in Bhursabera where the women who have formed the '*Banchita Nari Jagaran Mancha*' are middle aged and mostly uneducated. The women in Ajodhya Pahar are actively trying to negotiate a space within the greater politics of the forestland. Whereas, they would participate in the protests mostly urged by the leadership of PBABM to make the space more gender inclusive they would also pursue their own agenda with determination much to the irritation of the male leadership of the movement. Looking critically at the developments in Bhursabera, it could be said that PBABM intervention had managed to ensure a token women representation that was expected to function almost like a woman's wing of the organisation while neglecting to focus on the original demands of women against alcoholism. But the way in which the women of Ajodhya Pahar have strategically used these spaces to pursue their own agendas is an indicator of a continuous and dynamic negotiation for representation, space, dignity, and livelihood.

Conclusion

The current paper has focussed on the agency of women in making conscious political choices and not on details of their day to day struggle for livelihood. Yet, it is undeniable that the concern of the women over depleting forest cover and land alienation has led them to make conscious livelihood choices that have multiple political ramifications. In places like Deucha-Pachami, where state violence is more blatant, the women have come to the forefront of the resistance with general acceptance from the male leadership of the movement. In Ajodhya Pahar, despite the proposal of forest land diversion due to multiple pumped storage projects, the situation is not as volatile as Deucha-Pachami. Here, the political agenda of organisations like PBABM has been more constructive than confrontational in nature. The nature of the movement itself has made it possible for women to negotiate a space within the movement to voice their own demands sometimes even going against the male leadership, which thinks that the focus of women on alcoholism is sometimes divisive for the movement.

In Bhursabera, where the women have come together to form a social organisation, their relationship with PBABM has often suffered due to a clash of interests. Brewing alcohol is economically important to men and women of many families in Bhursabera which also gives it a form of social sanction. However, the women who have resisted alcoholism in the village were more concerned about domestic violence as a result of alcoholism which in several cases has led them to go against their own families. A simple reading of the situation can lead to the apparent conclusion that the attempt of PBABM to include the women of Bhursabera in its campaign is a tokenistic approach inspired by the urban influences to add gender diversity to the movement without acknowledging the real demands of the women. However, it is also true that in all three villages including Bhursabera the women have a good understanding of the political need to organise against forestland diversion and have often spontaneously joined the agitations against the forest department while negotiating with the leadership of the movement to pursue their own demands by offering conditional support to the politics of PBABM. The reluctance of women to give up the demand to stop alcoholism in Bhursabera had stalled the formation of the Chhatni Gram Sabha, while in Barujara, where the women have been involved in the politics to reclaim

Bamni Falls from the very beginning, the formation of Barujara-Dulgubera-Badhghutu Gram Sabha has been completed smoothly.

To conclude, we argue that women in Ajodhya Pahar are more than passive spectators or actors manipulated by the male leadership of the forestland politics of Ajodhya Pahar. During situations of direct confrontation with the police or the forest department, the women have often made conscious political choices to act against the state machinery, shielding the male activists from direct police brutality. In other instances, the women in Ajodhya Pahar have negotiated with the traditional community structure to push their own agenda through the greater movement for forest rights.

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