

## THE PEOPLE OF MANAR AND THEIR 'VAN AMMA'

### A Community forestry success story by BAIF team

Champawat, a small district in North-Eastern Uttarakhand is surrounded by Nepal in East, Pithoragarh in North, Almora in West and Nainital in South. 90 % of area in Champawat is mountainous and a very little portion is plains/Tarai. The villages of Champawat are at the elevation of 1000 to 7000 feet from mean sea level. The main source of livelihood is agriculture and livestock, with agriculture mostly being rain-fed. Irrigated land is only 10 % of total agriculture farm. The farms are scattered and terraced. The villages are surrounded with dense forests and hence attack of wild animals is also prominent, affecting farm productivity. But the forests are also important for the village people because these forests are the major source of fodder for their animals and fuel-wood. Besides, water sources also flow from these forests. Due to increasing population and deforestation, there has been limitation of wood, grass, fodder, fuel from these forests and water sources dried. People started cutting trees of other surrounding forests for fuel and fodder. The major impact was seen on women who had to walk for long distances to collect water, fodder and fuel-wood, that took 5-6 hours every day. Animal health was affected and their milk production reduced. The economic condition of people became poor and consequently, they started migrating and fields were left barren. Climate change further aggravated their situation. Broad leaf trees were replaced by Pine forests that deteriorated soil quality and increased the pace of water scarcity.

The village Manar (elevation of 5000-6000 ft.) of Pati block faced the similar situation. Manar is at 20 kms from the district headquarters Champawat. The village has a population of about 700. The village had a 12 ha forest area which was almost finished till 2005-06. In name of trees there were only remnants of oak, kharsu, pagar, kafal, etc. Water sources had dried and only scattered barren lands were seen. Fortunately, BAIF was conducting surveys at that time for a silvi-pasture programme for livestock development, and Manar was selected for the project.

Meetings were organized and gradually people started realizing the importance of forest conservation. They were informed that their forest comes in the category of 'Van-panchayat'. A woman of the village Manar named Smt. Bhagirathi Devi showed keen interest and actively conducted regular meetings with other women. The representatives from BAIF also attended



**Van Amma Smt. Bhagirathi Devi**

the meetings, motivated people and shared information with them. Seeing her concern and interest, Bhagirathi Devi was selected the 'Sarpanch' of the Van-panchayat. Her husband Shri Diwan Singh also supported her and started guarding the forest. After a few months, a meeting was called where BAIF representatives were also invited and it was decided that every family will submit Rs. 50 to 'Van Suraksha Samiti' (Forest Protection Committee). With the savings, a guard would be employed for Rs. 2000 monthly salary. For next 12 months, grazing by domestic animals was completely restricted. Bhagirathi Devi penalized the villagers whose animals grazed in the forest area. And within 1 year greenery started appearing in the forest.

BAIF involved women for plantation and digging trenches for water conservation. BAIF purchased broad leaf trees like oak, kharsu, pagar, kafal, shehtoot, khadeek from Forest department and let the rural women plant them and take care of them. Bhagirathi Devi created an additional fund for plantation. Fodder collection from these forests was allowed only once (for 1 week) in 6 months. This procedure was followed from 2005-08 and consequently not only greenery started appearing but old springs also began rejuvenating. Where earlier water sources used to dry-up till April, now they lasted till May-June. Appropriate amount of rainfall in July added to the happiness of people. Meanwhile during 2010-11, small office of BAIF was established at Khetikhan and rural development activities like improved breeding services for livestock, fodder development, off-season vegetable cultivation, began in nearby villages. People felt motivated on seeing the forests of Manar and started forming SHGs and conducting meetings and discussions on rural development.

By 2014-15, the forest of Manar had become very dense and BAIF had also arranged for border fencing of the forest. A project of Climate change adaptation was implemented in 10 villages with Manar as one of the proposed villages during 2015-16. For all the villages, the devotion of people of Manar towards conservation of forest, water and land was an inspiration. But the status of all 15 Van-panchayats in the state was not good and people were not getting enough trees for plantation from the forest department. Then during village meetings, it was suggested by BAIF that the people should prepare their own saplings for the forest as they do for their farm crops and the fund that went to forest department, would be given to them. The people were distributed with polythene bags in which they grew seeds of different forest trees collected by women and set up a small nursery in the area. Besides women also began sowing walnut, malta, lemon and plum in these polythene bags. The saplings were ready to be planted within 6



**Van Amma sharing her experiences with the community**



months. 50,000, 1.5 lakhs and 3 lakhs saplings were ready during first, second and third year, respectively. Women began selling and planting these saplings and it became a source of livelihood for them. They took proper care of the plants.

With adequate amount of green fodder available for the animals, their milk production increased. As springs are replenished, there is drudgery reduction of women. Bhagirathi Devi personally takes initiatives to solve the problems of forest fires, trespassing, thefts, etc. She along with the people of Manar contribute for the protection and betterment of the forest. After listening to the success stories of Manar, the Chief Development Officer (CDO) of Champawat visited the forest and was told about the entire struggle and success stories from 2005-2017 by Bhagirathi Devi and other women of Manar. The CDO was so impressed that he called for a press conference at Champawat. The word spread and all the nearby villages taking motivation from Manar, developed a rural development model for about 1000 households. During visit of CGM NABARD to project villages of Climate Change project, he met Bhagirathi Devi and appreciated her constant efforts over years. He has also discussed to honour her.



**Van Amma with CGM NABARD during his visit to Climate Change project area (November 2019)**



**A small nursery of forest trees to be planted on**

### **Vanpanchayat land**

Behind all this, there is a huge contribution of dedication, struggle and courage of Bhagirathi Devi who kept constantly motivating people of Manar. People have given her the name 'Van Amma' (meaning: the mother of forest) because of her love for forest. Van Amma is indeed a hero of the forest who has won recognition and awards. She says, "Today women in the village take care of these plants like their children". The women of Manar tell that the process was slow but steady, with plants growing at every point, they were hopeful that one day they will not be short of wood, food and fodder. Today the villagers are protective about their forest. Whenever we talk about water, forest or land; Bhagirathi Devi and people of Manar would always be remembered. At this time when the world is facing problems of water scarcity, depletion of forest coverage, the people of Manar have established an epic model we can also derive inspiration from.



**The enormous 12 ha area of Vanpachayat in Manar (April 2020)**