



# Maati

Vinay Nair & Shiba Desor

November 2014



Project on  
**ALTERNATIVE PRACTICES AND VISIONS IN INDIA:  
DOCUMENTATION, NETWORKING, AND ADVOCACY**

Sponsored by Heinrich Boll Foundation, New Delhi

**Citation:** Nair, V & Desor, S. (2014). *Maati*. Pune, Maharashtra: Kalpavriksh.

**Author:** Vinay Nair and Shiba Desor

**Published by:**

Kalpavriksh

5, Shree Dutta Krupa, 908, Deccan Gymkhana, Pune 411004

[www.kalpavriksh.org](http://www.kalpavriksh.org)

**Date of First Publication:** November, 2014

**Cover Photo:** Women of Maati *Sangathan* during a cultural fair, Vinay Nair (May 2014)

**Photographs:** Ashish Kothari

**No Copyright:** No copyright is claimed on this work. You are free to copy, translate and distribute, without modification of the content. The only request is to acknowledge the original source and to share with us a copy of your reprint or translation.

This case study is an outcome of a project 'Alternative Practices and Visions in India: Documentation, Networking and Advocacy', supported by Heinrich Boll Foundation, India. It is part of a larger process towards exploring alternative frameworks and practices in India, that demonstrate ecological sustainability, social well-being and justice, direct democracy and economic democracy. To know more, see [www.vikalpsangam.org](http://www.vikalpsangam.org). To join a list-serve for discussions on the subject, contact [anurivelihoods@gmail.com](mailto:anurivelihoods@gmail.com).

**Design & Layout:** Tanya Majmudar

## Contents

1. Beginnings .....	1
2. A Life Free from Violence .....	2
3. Livelihood (Ecological + Food + Entrepreneurial) Security .....	4
3.1. Ecological Security .....	5
3.2. Food Security .....	7
3.3. Livelihood Diversification.....	8
4. Beginnings of an Alternative Education .....	12
5. The Question of Leadership .....	13
6. Challenges .....	13
7. Conclusion.....	14
Final Words .....	15

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the women of Maati for giving us a brief yet a very real glimpse into their daily lives, for being wonderful hosts – especially Basanti Rawat, Anusuya and Hirma Devi with whom we stayed with over our two visits, for their wonderful food and for their patience in face of our persistent questions.

We would also like to thank Malika Viridi and Ashish Kothari for indispensable help in revising drafts and holding further dialogue to arrive at newer understandings.

## 1. Beginnings



*Mesar Kund - the lake revived through the efforts of Maati and of the van panchayat of Sarmoli-Jaiti and Shankhadhura*

Located in a region called Munsiri (2200m) in Gori valley of Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, across from the west face of the Panchachuli mountain range in the Greater Himalaya, is a women's collective called Maati Sangathan. Maati (a Hindi term for 'earth') is an autonomous women's collective of mountain farmers, weavers, milk producers, vegetable vendors and self-employed entrepreneurs. Maati as a name is a symbol for what is one of their primary areas of concern – the soil itself, which conserves their water and from which they grow their food. But Maati as a *sangathan* (collective) goes much beyond meeting the basic needs of survival or management of commons. Its origins and evolution owes much to the context of where it is situated and the society

it inherited.

That society was and in many ways still is deeply patriarchal, where women still cannot inherit land, but take the majority of the burden of sustaining a household; from collecting wood and grass from forests to agricultural farm work and taking care of children. In spite of this starkly unequal division of work, women are often treated as second-class citizens, both in public life where they are traditionally restricted from participating in political processes, let alone run for office, and in private life where they may have to bear physical and psychological violence, which is often exacerbated by the consumption of alcohol by men.

It was in response to that very dimension – the link between alcohol consumption and domestic violence – that Maati came together in the mid-90s. It began with just two women – Malika Virdi of Sarmoli village and Basanti Rawat of Shankhadhura; after an especially vexing incident of violence against a woman in a nearby village. Malika and Basanti mobilized other women and slowly gathered support in the villages of the Gori valley such as in Jainti, Nansem and Nayabasti. This facilitated the holding of meetings and the sending of postcards to people's representatives in several villages around Munsiri, which resulted in a memorandum to the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh that called a halt to the sale of alcohol. While the government banned the brewing and sale of

### BOX 1: METHODOLOGY

*This case study is part of the project 'Alternative Practices and Visions in India: Documentation, Networking, and Advocacy', which is sponsored by HBF and written by Vinay Nair and Shiba Desor, Kalpavriksh. For the present report, field work was done in May 2014, which built upon documentation conducted in November 2013 (sponsored by Action Aid). Notes from a previous visit in 2012 by Ashish Kothari, and a write-up about Maati by one of its members (Malika Virdi) were also used.*

*Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Within Maati, those interviewed primarily were Malika Virdi, Basanti Rawat and Rekha Rautela. Extended discussions were held with Malika in May 2014 to clarify aspects that emerged from the first study report*

*([http://kalpavriksh.org/images/alternatives/CaseStudies/Maati\\_Case%20study%20report\\_25April2014.pdf](http://kalpavriksh.org/images/alternatives/CaseStudies/Maati_Case%20study%20report_25April2014.pdf)), in addition to a group discussion where all Maati women were present.*

---

1. SRUTI. 2013. Maati Sangathan. [ONLINE] Available at: [http://www.sruti.org.in/?q=sangathan/maati-sangathan#Anti\\_Liquor\\_Protest\\_2011](http://www.sruti.org.in/?q=sangathan/maati-sangathan#Anti_Liquor_Protest_2011).



home-made liquor, it stopped short of closing the shops. This was not surprising as the state of Uttarakhand made up to 733 crores in the decade between 2000 and 2011<sup>1</sup>, from the sale of liquor.

In a context that was as indifferent and antagonistic to women's issues, it was a shrewd move on Maati's part that they took up *Sharaab-bandi Abhiyan* (campaign for closure of liquor brewing and shops) as an economic and political cause, and not a moral one, by highlighting the fact that alcohol was used as leverage during local elections. This pragmatism is in evidence time and again in how Maati responds to a variety of issues to do with male and political hegemony. And yet within Maati, the moral dimension burned strong back then as it does now, of a life free from violence.

## 2. A Life Free from Violence

As mentioned, Maati came together after an especially stark instance of violence against women. Their approach in tackling this was pragmatic rather than only emotional. But there is a wide recognition within the *sangathan* that alcohol related violence on women is more a symptom than a cause in itself. The ultimate cause they felt, is the very structure of patriarchy that is deeply entrenched in their society's psyche, beyond the reasons from which the system originated. Historically, a woman would marry somebody from a distant village and move to the place where her husband would own some land, to help tend it and to have children. If she were given some land back in her own village, it would not really be possible for her to take care of it where distances between villages were considerable and the only means of transportation were on animal-back or on foot. This is also probably the origins of dowry, where instead of land, the

departing woman would be given some possessions for her use and security. But that too in modern times, has often been appropriated by the groom or his family.

Whatever the historical causes for the origins of patriarchy, it is a system with deep inequalities where a typical day for a woman begins before dawn and ends much after dusk, in between which she must obtain fuel for the household, tend to cattle and to farms, take care of children and cook multiple times a day. And yet in spite of this, to quote Malika, a woman's bodily integrity may be threatened by the person she is sleeping with, or by the person who gave birth to her, or by a person higher up in caste hierarchy or even by the state that is complicit in its silence.

In this context, Maati's strong and articulated value is to break this complicity of silence; not only of the state, but within the region, and within the units of the community and the family. They seek to put a stop to the culture of *chalta hai* (let it go) where even elements within society that are not strongly patriarchal or even sympathetic are complicit by their lack of protest; and instead very strongly articulate that *nahi chalta hai* (no it can't go on). Theirs is an ideology that is informed by feminist theory, but is not handed down or confined by feminism. This is because they recognize that beyond the issue of the equality between men and women, there are problems of differences in caste and class between women, and of competition

*Maati Women*



between men. For instance, a woman oppressed by gender within her caste and class may oppress a woman of a lower caste or class. Hence according to Malika, Maati does not tag itself as socialist feminist or anarcho-feminist or the various other schools of thought within feminism. But she admits that those thoughts and concepts do inform their way of living and working. They do not deny the relevance of feminist thought and politics, but above all – and this is articulated repeatedly – life itself is what they respond to.

Responding to life and its myriad complexity implies that even without the tools and words of formal theory, a woman with the experience of being oppressed attempts to fight back and to reclaim her dignity and her space. It also implies a recognition that power relationships between men and women are real, and whether you are born a woman, a man or another gender in between deeply impacts your life. Maati as a collective does not go with a set theory or ideology, but picks up the strain in these power relations, in the inequality within them and talks about them.

It may be tempting to think that with such widespread gender inequality within society that with the coming of a collective like Maati, women would be eager to join them. But in the experience of the women who began Maati, women approach them mostly at a time of crisis. For the most part they found that the majority of women are content with maintaining the status quo, and just get on with the life of work and child-care. It is only when notions of 'normality' are threatened, at an especially serious point of crisis or episode of violence when women seek help. When such help is sought, Maati responds by

offering advisory support or by building group pressure. The preference is always given to consensus building and strengthening informal community ties and to keep matters within smaller units of either the household, the *panchayat* or at a stretch the *Mahila Panchayat*<sup>2</sup>. The collective has also built alliances with other community groups and elected representatives; and over time just the invoking of the name of the collective has been enough and has become a sufficient deterrent. Yet another ideal that emerges from this, and which is also strongly felt, is of local self-governance that is both democratic and gender-equitable; and this will be



*Women of Maati in their store-cum-office space near Munsiri town*

elaborated upon later.

On Maati's part, the women who approach at a time of crisis – and they may be from far away villages – are not expected to meet repeated demands on their time for attending meetings of the collective. But there is certainly an expectation and a hope that they support other women in distress in turn and evolve from being victims of violence to women with agency. Because of this, the process of membership to Maati has become self-regulated and only those willing to participate in issues on a long-term basis become core members. In addition, selection as a core member requires a minimum of 6 months of volunteering in meetings,

2. *Mahila Panchayats are women's courts for dispute resolution where women use community level pressure to get justice.*

campaigns and protests. Overtime, the core member group has settled from 6 to 8 members and its composition is heterogeneous in terms of age, experience and caste groups.

Currently there are 7 members in the core group, but Maati's local network of women in Gori valley is much larger with 50 women involved in creating and selling woollen and other products, another 50 providing raw materials for them and 50 more in a farming group (more on these in section 3.3). There is one office/sales room and one working room for production. Most of the active members come from nearby villages – Sarmoli, (which includes the hamlets of Shankhadhura and Nansem), Jainti, Darkot, Nayabasti, Boonga, Ghorpatta, Suring, Barnia, Jalath, Dummer Talla and Malla, Quiri, Jimiya, Paton, Bangpani, Shilling, Khartoli, Sela, Madkot. Also among the 150 women in the larger network, there are about 25 that are engaged in a homestay program originally begun in 2004 (more in section 3.3).

It is recognized by the collective that women's issues are not independent of other issues inherently present in a context such as Munsiri. In fact for women to be active as citizens, it is critical that they have a degree of economic independence. To this end, they must first have a secure livelihood which in turn is closely linked with food and ecological security.

### 3. Livelihood (Ecological + Food + Entrepreneurial) Security

Traditional livelihoods in the region were primarily pastoral mixed with supplementary agriculture since Munsiri lies on the ancient trade-route from Kumaon in the Indian Himalaya to Tibet and there used to be seasonal migrations to buy and sell produce from the highest plateau in the world. This tie was abruptly broken during the 1962 war

between India and China when the border was closed. Since then, the transhumant and pastoral lifestyle has ground to a halt with the mountain communities shifting to a lifestyle based entirely on settled agriculture. Even back then, some people chose instead to migrate to cities in search of newer livelihoods. But for those who chose to stay back, forests came to take an even more critical importance since only they gave all the resources that were vital to sustain agriculture on rugged mountain soils.

Since the shift to a settled lifestyle, and similar to other agro-communities of the country, it has always been the women of the community that go into the forests to collect wood for fuel, grass as fodder and leaf litter to be used as manure in the fields. Use of local resources require a certain foresight; wood and grass have to be harvested in the dry periods of the year and stored for use in the monsoon and when it snows in the winter, whereas leaf litter is taken when it falls, which in this region is most of the year except the monsoon. Forests have hence become central to livelihoods – no matter the extent of supplements like tourism or migrant labour – because they provide water and food.

Also of historic importance is the founding of a *panchayat* (committee) – called the *Van Panchayat* (*van* meaning forest) comprised of 5 *panchas* (council members) elected in an open vote and 1 *sarpanch* (head) that the *panchas* select between them – that is specially tasked with the management of forest commons. *Van panchayats* came about as a result of massive state-wide protests in the 1920s and 30s against the control of local resources by the British government that was plundering them for industrial purposes (the *van panchayat* of Sarmoli-Jainti was constituted in 1949). The *van panchayat* is constituted for each village or sometimes a group of smaller villages and forest area is demarcated for each. Within this demarcation is a further division based on the family unit where families have traditionally accessed certain parts of forest and water resources

---

3. Datta, A. & Köhlin, G. (2013). *Tenure and Forest Management in India: Impacts and Equity and Efficiency of Van Panchayats in Uttarakhand*, In Holden, S., Otsuka, K. & Deininger, J (Eds.), *Land Tenure Reform in Asia and Africa: Assessing Impacts on Poverty and Natural Resource Management* (pp. 233-254). New York, Palgrave Macmillan.



and this has often become another point of inequality<sup>3</sup> where higher castes can and have wrested control over preferable areas.

In the 21st century, the challenge of commons management has been further complicated with the multiple pressures of the growing presence of tourism in the region, climate change and the growing importance and need for money within the community itself. Given such a context, it is futile to categorize food and livelihood security as separate from ecological security. This fact is very much reflected in Maati's approach to securing livelihoods in how closely they link women's economic independence to natural resource conservation.

### 3.1. Ecological Security

If there were to be a pyramid of importance for Maati, ecological security would be at the very base that links *Jal* (water), *Jangal* (forest) and *Zameen* (land). The recognition is strong that forests provide two things vital for human survival – water and resources to sustain agriculture. The forest complex of this

Both provide leaf litter that forms excellent organic fertilizer when mixed with cow-dung and urine. In addition there is a body of literature<sup>4</sup>, both oral and scientific, that suggests that an oak ecosystem is generally favourable for stopping water runoff, keeping moisture within the system and supporting a larger diversity of floral and faunal species.

Elsewhere in the state, the van panchayat management of these vital ecological resources has often run into problems of free riding that turns them into an open-access regime. Again, literature<sup>5</sup> has documented the weakening of *van panchayats* across the state by a combination of power politics within the community, the selling off of resources to distant markets, a gradual reduction in resource quality<sup>6</sup> due to patterns of usage and demographic transformations. In addition, even though women are the primary users in terms of access to forest resources, they are not considered right holders but only users<sup>7</sup> more by association with their families. This essentially reduces them to a role of unpaid labour without a

significant role in the management of their commons. Add to this the fact that women cannot own any agricultural land, it becomes clear that the users of forest resources and the producers of food are alienated from managing the link between the two.

Maati's approach then was to have a more direct participation in commons

management, especially for women. In 2003, Malika was elected as *Sarpanch* (head) of the Sarmoli-Jainti *van panchayat*. This, despite the fact that she was originally an 'outsider'.



*Terraced fields of Sarmoli*

region is an overstorey of species of oak and an understorey of species like rhododendron.

4. Thadani, R. & Singh, S.P. (2006). *The Impact of Indigenous People on the Oak-Pine Forests of the Central Himalaya*, In Vogt, K.A. (Ed.), *Forests and Society: Sustainability and Life Cycles of Forests in Human Landscapes* (pp. 48). CABI.

5. Agrawal, A. & Yadama, G. (1997). How do local institutions mediate market and population pressures on resources? *Forest Panchayats in Kumaon, India. Development and Change* 28 (3), 435–65.

6. Britt-Kapoor, C. (1994). A Tale of Two Committees: Village perspectives on local institutions, forest management and resource use in two central Himalayan Indian villages, In *Rural Development Forestry Network Paper No. 17a*. London: ODI.

7. Sarin, M. (2001). Disempowerment in the name of participatory forestry *Forest, Trees and People Newsletter* 44 : 26–34.

In truth, the position fell on her shoulders more by the fact that nobody else wanted to take on the complex and onerous responsibility of heading a *van panchayat*. But during her tenure, by-laws were made that conferred right holder status to the woman head of the household along with the male head in a dual right holder status. In addition, all permanent women residents of the village – regardless of their marital status – were accorded right holder status. This enabled women's active participation in conservation of commons as primary owners, beyond their status as mere users.

In the decade and a half since, women have taken the lead in the larger effort to check free riding and prevent the descent of the commons into an open access regime. Rules concerning forest litter directed removal only after the 17th of every month to prevent complete removal and enough left over to ensure equitable distribution for all stakeholders. In addition, rules concerning wood harvest require that only dead twigs and branches be lopped or removed from the forest floor. Harvesting of dead or live trees would require explicit permission from the *van panchayat* governing committee of the five *panchas* and the *sarpanch*. Also during her tenure, a female forest guard was kept. The guard was from a different village altogether, which generally affords greater authority and is preferable to avoid bias to particular stakeholders. When offenders were caught, their tools were confiscated and a fine levied. As a result of these multiple factors, the members of Maati together with other stakeholders have successfully managed to replant and restore their *van panchayat* forest to a state of health and equitably share the benefits thereof. These benefits include the greater and more consistent availability of grass for fodder, fuel-wood and leaf litter.

Beyond their own forest commons, Maati has also been active in the Munsiri Van Panchayat Sangathan and has been part of groups that have effectively questioned state-

led models of development like the planned 8 large, 10 medium and 10 smaller hydropower projects that were/are being proposed for the 100km stretch of the Gori river. Implementation of these projects would have / will cause large scale displacement and significant destruction of forest and hydrological resources. Women in large numbers have supported and joined in public protests by the project affected people and against the land acquisition attempts by the state on the behest of the company. Finally, in 2010, one of the planned projects, Rupsiabagar-Khasiyabara project of National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), was rejected by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). Yet, this question is deeply political with differences within the community itself with a portion of the population believing that the project should have been cleared. This segment also has connections to powerful political leaders at the state level that have an interest in seeing such and similar projects go through.

However according to Malika, the process of this mobilization and politicization within Sarmoli and other villages has been significant in two key ways. First that for more effective commons management, it was learnt as essential that the right holders are more active citizens in a direct democratic model, as opposed to a representative one. The representative model of democracy has inherent vulnerabilities to private and state sponsored large capital. To combat this, each right holder must have the moral authority to

*Home grown mirch laid out to dry at Basanti di's*



continue to protect and refrain from exploiting forest resources – which can only come from having actual rights over using and managing those resources.

Secondly, this use of forest commons must be to support a form of livelihood that is local with a low footprint. These forms of livelihood do not have to be necessarily on a scale of subsistence (as we shall see), but must hold most important the continued availability and sustainable use of forest resources to meet that subsistence at the very least.

### 3.2. Food Security

Technically, food can be grown without using the by-products of cattle and forest resources. When there are alternative sources of income present such as with the influx of tourists, both the seed and government-subsidized fertilizer can be bought from markets near and far; and a family can feed itself or its guests. The return on using inorganic fertilizer may be high in the initial years and this is often incentive enough for farmers to shift away from traditional ways of farming. The consequences of decreasingly soil fertility and productivity are not immediately apparent. This has indeed happened in Munsiri as well.

Maati's philosophic stand on agrarian land and food security is similar to their stance on commons management – to have a more direct say in land management, especially for women; and to keep the loop of production and consumption local. Maati has strongly campaigned for the transference of agricultural land titles in women's name within households. To make headway in this regard is difficult as the idea confronts deeply held patriarchal and property regime beliefs. Very few women have actually come to have land put in their names, but members of Maati believe that the idea has gradually taken root and is only going to grow.

In addition, to make farming a more viable option long-term, it becomes critical that the link between food production and soil fertility and forest management is revitalized. To further reduce risk, local seeds must be conserved not in a bank, but through constant circulation of planting and harvesting each

season. The preference is also to stay organic to maintain soil fertility.

Since women do not own the land that they work on, they are not recognized as farmers and cannot avail of the financial and technical inputs that the state may provide. So Maati decided to create an identity for women farmers and dairy workers to form their own agricultural and livestock self-help groups (SHGs). As a result, collecting, procuring and sharing of seeds is done within these groups and that helps with revitalizing traditional agricultural knowledge systems of maintaining productivity and controlling pests. After self-consumption, the surplus of food is marketed in local markets and to the local tourism industry. For this, Maati also holds an event called a '*haat*' twice a month where members can sell their produce locally or to tourists.

Those with marginal land holdings are experimenting with floriculture as the altitude is favourable to growing beautiful flowering plants - both local and exotic varieties. However, keeping exotic varieties of flowers may have some inherent risks of their own, especially if they are pollinated easily through wind. Exotic varieties can often decimate local floral compositions and enough should be known about particular species before they are introduced.

Experiments are also afoot with slow food – a concept intrinsic to many traditional lifestyles, and now growing popular in the west – that attempts to replace pre-packaged industrial foods with local and fresh traditional food. Admittedly this is still a hard sell to the younger generation even in a relatively small urban pocket like Munsiri, that is inundated with images on T.V. of apparently delicious packaged food and so to cater to them, Maati's *haat* also sells solar-baked cakes and biscuits. Solar cooking is something that has a huge potential in an area such as this that has abundant sunshine through a substantial part of the year and is well suited to the cooking of staple foods including lentils, rice, vegetables and the more modern methods of jam making and baking.



### 3.3. Livelihood Diversification

As mentioned earlier, Maati strongly believes that for women to be active as citizens, they must be independent economically. Strengthening the natural resource base in their forests and pursuing an organic and holistic way of farming is well and good, but in itself it is insufficient in a context where money is important, from being able to send children to school to other miscellaneous



*Pushpa di weaving an asan - one of Maati's products*

expenses. Hence, Maati attempts to compliment income generation through various other devices. First, it does not seek funding for its activities because of the possible danger of them being directed by its source. Instead, Maati relies on donations from a body of supporters who contribute in small cash donations. Each member of the collective has an equal responsibility for obtaining donations. As yet, they receive donations from about 150 people – ranging from community members, kin and friends – and that amounts to 80-85000 rupees per year. This – and a nominal fellowship from SRUTI (approximately 17000) – is split as honoraria among core members of

the group.

Second, Maati organizes women in their capacity as primary producers, and provides marketing to obtain better and more consistent prices for their produce. Their produce ranges from wool products (obtained from local sheep) such as sweaters, caps, scarves and blankets, tailoring services such as school uniforms, spices, herbs and other agricultural produce. Raw material is sourced locally from 50 women in about 12 villages. For all other purposes the groups are informal, but they have been given SHG status to avail various subsidies available from the government. So the woolwork unit is called Oonchan, tailoring services is Maati ke Rang, spices and herbs become Maati ki Mehak and agriculture produce Maati ka Gunn. Products related to food are sold mostly in local markets (though available to visitors), whereas wool-work is mostly marketed to visiting tourists. Maati has a small shop where these products are stored and sold. Also as earlier mentioned, Maati organizes a monthly get-together called the Maati Haat where any number of women from neighbouring villages can come and sell their produce. This was also meant as an arena of interaction between Maati members with the wider community and also for other women to learn the strength and potential of a *sangathan*. However in Maati's own admittance, it has not quite worked out that way, since the nature of a marketplace is competitive and not conducive to making

*Maati Shop, Munsiri*





informal alliances.

Importantly, and unlike other livelihood-supporting initiatives in the state of Uttarakhand, Maati consciously limits its personnel-to-production ration. They have rejected certain orders because the scale would be too demanding for the limited amount of people who work with them and the amount of time that they believe those people ought to put in. The idea of limiting its own scale is to prevent working people from becoming just workers, the quintessential nine to five factory producers. Specialists are absent and not encouraged; everyone must participate in seed conservation, in organic farming, in *van panchayat* management and in putting up the political front. Because of this self-imposed limitation, the enterprise as a whole lowers its profit-making but this is accepted as necessary. Surplus time, if any, is spent in other ways of being creative.

More recently, Maati has also actively taken up work on seed conservation through a SHG called Maati VanyaSamooch. The attempt is to revive traditional seeds such as *bhat*, *masur*, *daal*, *jaun*, *rajma* and *madua*, by sourcing them from various markets beyond Munsiri such as Pantnagar and Almora. There is also work to support existing organic agriculture which another SHG, Maati Krishak Samooch, avails of a subsidy for organic pesticide from the horticultural department and also a veterinary scheme which subsidizes livestock care (through schemes for fodder, water trough, etc.). Again the only reason that these

*Participants of Munsiri Bird Festival 2014*



informal groups had to be organized as self-help groups is because the government does not recognize individual women as farmers.

The third significant supplement to incomes is the homestay program. Within this, extra rooms in houses can be rented to tourists / paying guests. This first began in 2004 through the Sarmoli-Jainti *van panchayat* with assistance from the Forest Department that helped build some of those extra rooms and separate toilets. Since then, it has moved out of the *van panchayat* and has become a free standing enterprise with Maati women coming to the fore to manage it. Tariffs amount to ₹ 800/- per person per night which is comparable or cheaper than what is charged by hotels in the Munsiri town area.

On average, those letting out rooms to tourists would have an occupancy of about 100 days and up to 20 guests a year. Of the amount charged, 1% goes toward a conservation fund administered by Maati, 4% goes as savings for future home improvements and 20% toward managing the entire operation. Also Himayalan Ark, which runs a tourism and adventure business based in Munsiri, gives loans to member families on a nominal interest rate to upgrade and improve homes and facilities. Since the village is located on a scenic visitation route, the homestay program has become a considerable source of earning for the participating villagers. Those women who do not have a room to spare participate in nature activities for tourists as guides. So far a total of 25 families have participated and

have hosted guests from 20 countries. And as of late 2014, there are 17 homestays in total that are within Maati – 12 in Sarmoli, 3 in Paton, and 1 each in Khartoli and Shilling.

It is important to note that the tariff mentioned above is primarily for urban visitors – who usually belong to the middle class and are able to pay – and not for other villagers themselves or visitors who arrive for various camps from other organizations who are often

accommodated for free across the various members' homes.

It is also interesting that within Maati, the arrangement for homestays is informal; in that the members don't get guests in a regular periodic cycle. Instead, depending on how well one is doing at a certain point of the year in terms of finances, one may give one's chance away to another who might be in need for money more. For instance, Malika is also part of the homestay program, but also charges more – almost double – per night to let one of her rooms out. This is because the room is a separate dwelling from her house with its own kitchen and attached bathroom. But at the same time, she may skip one or two cycles of hosting and let others take guests in her place. Those with alternative sources – like a pension, a salary coming into the household or ability to find work – are generally given lower priority. Essentially, the members look out for each other.

Also importantly, to be a member of the homestay program, there has to be an adherence to the basic principles and philosophy of Maati. Members are persuaded to reiterate their commitment to conserving the forest by not free riding, participating in voluntary work to protect the forest, to vow not to sell locally brewed liquor and to take a stand against domestic violence.

Transformations in social relations have been in significant in those households that have

*One of the homestays in Sarmoli, owned and run by Maati member Kamla di.*



women who are part of the homestay program in particular and Maati in general. Hosting strangers in one's house was at best an alien idea, especially when the visitors could be men. In the beginning some men in the family would be hesitant even to let women go for Maati's general meetings, let alone host guests. Mohini Devi of Nayabasti village for example, had to lie at home that she was going grass cutting when she in fact would be attending meetings. In time, husbands and families of at least the core members of Maati have come around; not least because the income generated by hosting guests is not negligible. In another demonstration of the pragmatism of the group, this is accepted. Economic independence, it is hoped in the long run, will bring about changes in attitudes. And in some cases they have as is witnessed by the fact that women are now getting into positions of power like the panchayat. Bina Nitwal, a core member, who runs both a homestay and sells her produce through Oonchan, is also a ward *panch* of the *gram panchayat* (village committee) of her village.

Yet another dimension is the increasing interaction between the hosts and the guests; who are almost always on opposite sides of the urban/rural divide. In this author's personal experience at one of the core members' house in Shankhadhura, the model works well. All too often, the tourism experience for a traveller visiting hotels in places such as these is of scenic places but little or no contact with the lives of local people. In contrast, a homestay gives the distinct impression of having known real people, if only a little and only briefly. The visitor is drawn into the lives of people who live close to the land and the natural resource base around them and is cajoled, depending on his/her willingness, in discovering a little of where the water and food comes from, how much waste is generated and where it is going. Little of it could actually be seen generated, as what is served is seasonal household produce

itself. Contrast this to the tourist centre of Munsiri which is increasingly, though on a much smaller scale, heading the way of Almora – a cramped shanty-like appearance of concrete shops, dusty roads and expensive hotels with everything on the menu. In the departing traveller's mind a homestay is associated with people and culture, and not just the scenery.

However, is it an equitable and genuine cultural exchange<sup>8</sup>? Even though the visitor is immersed in the life and ways of local people; for the hosts themselves, the visitor is always bound to provide only a shade and a kind of an urban experience. The cause of this is that the current structure of the national economy reinforces an old truth – which is that travel for leisure has always been a middle or higher caste pursuit. The homestay tariff (low as it is relatively) in addition to costs of travel, immediately rules out visitors of other classes or those who do not belong to organizations with funds. The exchange then becomes incomplete because the experience of urbanity for say an urban waste picker or a traffic policeman is fundamentally different to a middle-class urbanite who cannot explain the experience of not being from his/her own class. The middle-class urbanite, however humble, exhibits a certain relative affluence borne out of his possessions and by his/her mere presence therein – the ability to suspend questions of his/her livelihood and be able to travel for leisure; and this is the shade of urban possibility that the hosts are continually exposed to. Popular culture and art in movies and on television exacerbates the problem by feeding images of sanitized urban production and consumption that is oblivious of its associated problems.

On the other hand, travel for rural people to urban areas is more difficult. Even if and when that privilege can be afforded, is there an 'urban Maati' who would host them in an equivalent way? It can be said that an urban experience for rural visitors would be extremely fragmentary – as it is for the urban residents themselves; fragmentary in the

sense of class and geography. Cities and urban areas are increasingly marked by segregation of space between the rich and poor, and the psychological sense of independence that that creates – as evidenced by the proliferation in recent decades of gated communities. The average urbanite is not able to encapsulate as to where resources come from or where waste goes in cities – much less be able to explain that to rural visitors.

And yet it can be said that much depends on the individuals involved to transcend these categories and limitations, and Maati's platform is much more conducive than the average relationship in conventional tourism that is based purely on receiving services in exchange for money.

In concluding the section on homestays, it is important to offer some criticism on the aspect of architecture. The people and families who run homestays are of course eager to create structures and furnishing that they think are familiar to their guests and which will keep them comfortable. Observing some of these structures, often built upon or adjacent to older dwellings, it is clear that they follow along lines of urban trends and not necessarily locally relevant. Traditional dwellings in the area comprised of stone walls, slate roofs and mud floors, whereas the new structures are plastered cement and often have tin roofs. From the point of view insulating against both heat and the intense cold of the winter, the new materials are poor choices and are chosen perhaps by assumptions of what urban visitors are used to. Stone and slate are admittedly not abundantly available locally as before, yet the use of cement guarantees mining of limestone somewhere else and the associated costs of transport. It is important that as livelihoods diversify, they still attempt to adhere to reducing their footprint in all aspects of their work; and that the blend between the old and modern is useful and not merely ornamental.

---

8. Outlook traveller. 2011. *Homestay is Where the Heart is*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.archive.outlooktraveller.com/printarticle.aspx?271311>.



## 4. Beginnings of an Alternative Education

Maati has also begun an initiative on local education through an informal gathering called Jungli School and a newly started library and resource centre called Prakriti Kendra. The origins of the Jungli School and the Prakriti Kendra lie in the belief that conventional state education leaves important voids by not being sufficiently local and connected to nature. Instead, the school and the Kendra attempt to bring context to what children learn through mediums in addition to reading, such as photographs, walks to connect with local nature and the



*Jungli School Kids Birding*

land, games, art and craft activities, story-telling etc. But at the same time, it exposes them to how local issues build up into global ones. The vision is to give children a certain confidence in being able to think both small and large at the same time. The Kendra is at present situated in Sarmoli village. Both of these are a joint initiative of Maati and the environmental group Himal Prakriti, a trust for nature that has been working on environment issues in the Himalaya. The school currently has a modest scale of about 25 children from the ages of 4 to 17.

The Jungli School initiative may yet be one of the more important efforts of Maati, especially at a time when children are

exposed to a mainstream culture, both in conventional schools and through advertisement-drenched television, wherein competitiveness is supreme. The school instead imbibes values of consensus building, curiosity as pleasure, and experiencing as equally important as knowing. There is the belief also that to effectively question threats from within and outside society, certain confidence has to be given to children at a young age that learning is possible anywhere as long as curiosity and certain minimum tools are present.

In a very real way, the Jungli School feeds into the larger efforts of Maati that tackle head on the issue of migration. An important

distinction is made between two kinds of migration – distress migration when people are running away from bitter realities, e.g. due to subjugation by gender, caste, class or landlessness; and migration because of aspirations forged through a variety of influences. Maati's political involvement seeks to transform the first kind; to make the region more

conducive for traditionally subjugated groups to thrive. Here their slogan has been '*sirf satta-parivartan nahi, vyvastha-parivartan*'; which means that they seek not just a cyclic change of political guard, but transformations at the systemic level. The Jungli School on the other hand is a more subversive attempt at creating a discourse on development, progress and well-being. Maati does not discourage dreams that may be forged out of their region and in the city; but attempts to give children a platform where a more informed decision can be made.



## 5. The Question of Leadership

Malika, as mentioned earlier, was not originally from Sarmoli. She first came to Munsiri in 1992 with her husband E. Theophilus and their 6 month old son; and for various reasons they decided to stay on and bought some land. Malika's acceptance into the community was gradual, based much on her slowly acquired prowess as a farmer, a primary producer. She represents a unique part of Maati, in the skills and insights into market mechanisms that an urban middle class woman can bring. Whereas producers of knit and other products were competing with each other in local markets, she pointed toward the benefits of collective production in which the individual producer was protected by set prices and consistent sale/income. When it came to political problems, her urban awareness of bureaucracy must have been essential, simply as confidence and an articulation in dealing with the state. But even there, to quote Malika, she always chooses to be in the 'middle of a march, neither at the front nor at the back'; the logic of which is that the person/party most affected should be in the lead. It is a political necessity also, to be not seen as an outsider who spearheads. Her role with the *sangathan* is similar to the role of what Maati is attempting to play within the larger community and which has become their motto – '*hum naitritva karte hain, netagiri nahin*' (we act with leadership, but are not political leaders).

Yet, would it be misleading to call her the founder or the leader of the collective? Was her initial role not absolutely indispensable in getting and keeping people together, by providing an opportunity to create a more reliable source of income? In a conversation where these questions were put to her, she said of course and that she had no illusions or self-deprecation about her place in the collective. However, she added, the *sangathan* is based on trust and an honest appraisal of each member's strengths and weaknesses; whatever authority exists grows organically and is malleable. Leadership is only relevant as far as it gets a diverse people

who are facing similar problems together, but who are thinking beings in their own right and who can work collectively to attempt to find solutions and not be given solutions from the outside.

Malika recounts Saraswati di – an elderly friend of the *sangathan* – and her subtlety when dealing with political issues. She was more aware of the nuances of how people interacted when they would be together in a group. And this too is a form of leadership, where the diversity in how people respond when situations present themselves makes a group stronger.

## 6. Challenges

Some notes of caution. In the context and the local region of where Maati is situated, the significance of money for buying necessities and desirables, sending children to schools and colleges that are still mainstream in nature, and having a more comfortable material life are increasing at more or less the same pace as any urban centre of India. A significant part of the younger generation, notwithstanding the recent efforts of the Jungli School, does imagine a future life somewhere distant in a city – aided with visions from the ubiquitous television and popular cinema.

Even for those who escape this marketing onslaught, land and opportunities for local diversification are limited. Some people will need to migrate, if only to make a living, and not just to follow their dreams; and opportunities that await them in cities are of a distinct urban flavour. Perhaps an error made often when we look at initiatives like Maati is that we examine them alone, as separate from distant urban centres that have their own unique problems and threats. In fact, Maati and similar efforts are seen as setting an example, that not only other villages but also cities can then learn from. Certainly for its own context, Maati does set some exemplary examples with its integration of social, ecological, political and economic dimensions in approaching issues – in stark contrast to dominant policies of the country which are geared toward increasing economic

growth at severe environmental and social costs. But urban life – so long separated from thoughts of food production and land management – is increasingly parasitic on its surrounding areas and efforts to transform it are few. But more importantly, urban middle class life is also lulled into a sense of helpless complacency fuelled by popular culture with its aural and visual trinkets of entertainment. There is an urgent need to examine these visions of a dream life being fed to each household and to society at large across urban/rural divides through television and movies. The sense of complacency that popular culture engenders prevents widespread contemplation of what certain policies imply for places where initiatives like Maati are situated.

An awareness of Maati's precariousness is something Malika revealed in a conversation - 'We are being buffeted from all sides. We might get squished out anytime. When we protest against a *sharab ka thekha* (liquor booth), people want to arrest us. The struggle is so fragile, the voice is so fragile, it's not because we are so small, but because of what we are up against.'

## 7. Conclusion

For nearly two decades now, Maati Sangathan has made a sustained effort to work with social, political and environmental issues in a model that is sustainable and that works on the principles of equality and direct democracy. They began with a vision of a life free from violence for those oppressed by inequitable gender relations – women, and for those oppressed in other ways of caste and class. In battling these problems, they have

been both pragmatic and revolutionary. Indeed, they were even opportunistic in taking advantage of the market to give women economic independence, but also at the same time they imbibed strong values in all of their work.

The strongest value is to have a more direct participation in decision making across varying levels – within the family across differences of gender and age, within the community across differences of caste and class, and within regions across differences of rural and urban. Hence, the woman in the family who gathers forest resources and who puts in the larger shift in the farm, must have a say over the governance and management of both forests and seeds. Similarly, the community must have a say in the governance and management of its commons against narrow private interests from both within and outside the community. Finally, the exchange between the urban and the rural – as expressed by tourism – must be mutually non-exploitative, beneficial and enriching. Such an articulation is also immediately against the representative model of democracy, where some individuals are chosen to make decisions for others. This has been shown to be beset with problems, not the least of which is amplifying already present inequalities in power relations within communities.

In turning the table over long present hegemonies however, Maati is also careful to give the individual and the community the moral authority to question them. This is through the attempt to holistically revitalize the links between commons management, livestock keeping and traditional ways of

### BOX 2: SHORTCOMINGS

*The gaps in the present report are as a result of sampling technique (mentioned in Box 1), which was partial toward those members who were articulate and used to answering questions about the collective. Second, as a related point and as borne by the report, is that these women are quite busy with the work of both the collective and of their families. For better sampling, it is felt by the authors that much more time has to be spent in the field (of the magnitude of months), to document more particular stories of each member of the collective. In addition, it would be helpful to understand more the history of land-use change in the region, the impact of tourism, and the ultimate causes of alcoholism in men – for a more holistic insight into the context within which Maati is situated.*

farming. They checked free riding in forests to ensure a more equitable distribution of resources, and mixed with the by-products of livestock keeping, they obtained abundant organic manure for their fields. They took charge of the seed of their harvest in a dynamic bank of exchange and selection through hands. They thereby, at least partially, closed the loop of production and consumption.

Their involvement in the resistance against dams is an important part within the larger effort to challenge mainstream notions of development. Their argument has been for collective good over narrow individual interests and a democratic model based on participation, and not merely representation.

Lastly Maati's initiative at an alternative education through the Jungli School, is an attempt to transcend their values beyond their own generation, by rejecting notions of competitiveness and embracing values of holistic learning.

### **Final Words**

It can be said that Maati has an alternative vision that is being practiced in a living way. Grappling with issues of male hegemony, mainstream development, and local politics, it has sustained its work for more than two decades. Whether Maati inspire initiatives that emerge organically and which together will point toward an alternative vision for society at large, is something which is beyond their own reckoning. What is certain is that an imprint of the *sangathan's* work will remain in the lives of the many women it has strengthened and drawn strength from, and perhaps in the lives of the people who visit and interact with them, or learn about them from networks.