

SOPHIA
Society for the Promotion of Himalayan Indigenous Activities
From a research report by
Mira Fels, Graduate student, University of Hamburg, Germany

In the autumn of 2004, Mira Fels visited India as part of her studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology. She spent ten days with SOPHIA (Society for the Promotion of Himalayan Indigenous Activities), an organisation which works with the Van Gujjar, who live a nomadic life in the Shivalik forests at the foothills of the Himalayas (www.sophiaddn.org).

She posed specific questions for her research:

1. Which problems are most urgent for disadvantaged groups? What solutions do they and the NGO offer?
2. Who is responsible for these problems? Who could, or should, solve them? How?
3. What future would people like to see for their children, their community and their country?

These were then broken down further:

BREAKDOWN OF QUESTION 1

To the NGO:

- § What is the primary goal of your NGO?
- § What are the biggest development problems in the community?
- § What is the social structure of the community?
- § What problems do the Van Gujjar have to cope with? How do you know this?
- § How do you try to help? (How do you help directly? Do you also work politically? Do you co-operate with the Panchayat? Or with any international group?)

Questions to the local people:

- § Are you satisfied with your situation? If yes, then why? If no, then why not?
- § What are you most worried about? (Economics? Education? Agriculture? Discrimination?)
- § What is your economic situation?
- § What are the biggest development problems in your community?
- § How do you try to solve these problems? Can you think of any other way to solve them?
- § Who do you ask for help with your problems? The NGO? The Panchayat? The Pradhan? Why? Who don't you ask and why not?

- § What does the NGO do for you? How does it help you to solve your problems?
- § What does the Panchayat do for you?

BREAKDOWN OF QUESTION 2

To local people and NGO workers:

- § How long have the problems that you face been in existence?
- § Where do these problems come from? (unequal distribution of wealth, corruption, politics, discrimination)
- § Who is responsible? (Please identify those responsible locally, regionally and nationally)
- § Why did they cause these problems?
- § Who should do something about these problems? How? What stops them?

BREAKDOWN OF QUESTION 3

To local people and NGO workers:

- § What kind of future would you like to see for your children?
- § What kind of future would you like to see for your community?
- § What does development mean to you? What is positive/negative about it?
- § What does globalisation mean to you? What is positive/negative about it?

Semi-structured interviews, brochures, evaluations, website, grand tour interviews, research in the local media and participant observation were used to elicit the responses to these questions.

Development in India

Since Independence in 1947, the Indian government has prioritised the fight against poverty in each Five Year Plan. Between 1951 and 1996, the annual income per person doubled and the production of food grew fourfold. The life expectancy also doubled while the rate of infant deaths fell by 50%.

Nevertheless 36% of the population still live in poverty, which means they cannot afford the food they need on a daily basis. That figure is 20% less than in 1974, but since the population has grown very rapidly, the absolute number of poor has actually increased. More than half the children under four years of age (approximately 60 million) are malnourished, especially girls. Between 1951

and 1995 the number of those who can read tripled, but half of all Indians are still illiterate, especially women.

After Independence, the government tried much harder to raise the level of production than to achieve a more equal distribution of wealth. State-owned companies and industry were supported but small-scale industries and companies, in which the poor work, were not given equal importance. The green revolution was successful in achieving higher yields, but only those peasants benefited who had enough money to invest in costly equipment. New health centres and educational facilities were built but mostly in cities, not reaching the majority of the poor living in villages. There was more investment in higher educational facilities but less in primary schools. The Census of 2001 stated that 27% of rural inhabitants still did not have access to safe drinking water or roads. Developmental politics were centrally planned and managed and local village institutions were not consulted. The inequalities sustained or even worsened by these policies are a major problem for India today.

The government defines poverty on a monetary scale. The poor are those who cannot afford to buy the food they need on a daily basis. This one-sided definition of poverty makes it more difficult to focus on other important dimensions of poverty: child labour, prostitution, illiteracy, environmental destruction and discrimination because of caste or gender. 'Positive discrimination' for disadvantaged groups ('Scheduled Castes and Tribes') has not had a major impact yet. The poor themselves emphasize the importance of a multidimensional view of their situation. Their most important wishes are: a good education for their children, health care, a safe environment and the reduction of exploitation and discrimination.

There are considerable differences in the state of development in different regions. In spite of a rather slow growth compared with other states, Kerala has invested much more in basic facilities, with impressive results: the life expectancy of women is 74 years, 20 years more than in Uttar Pradesh. Fewer than 15% of adult women cannot read and write and the fertility rate is only 2% (4% in other states). This is why the absolute number of the poor is also declining. In 1994 there were only half as many poor in Kerala as in 1974.

The majority of the Indian poor live in rural areas. In 1995 70% of all Indians worked in the agricultural sector which was responsible for 40% of the Gross National Product. The peasants are poor because ownership of agricultural land is

very unequal. 50% of villagers do not own land and approximately five million peasants work for years without being paid because they are in debt. In the fifties and sixties, the government tried to redistribute the land, but the attempt failed because most landlords only gave land to their relatives and friends.

Most of those who suffer from hunger or malnutrition are peasants. The British colonial government supported monocultures and big plantations which led to the downfall of the formerly integrated agriculture. Small peasants, mostly from lower castes, lost their land. When the green revolution came, it was beneficial only to the wealthy. Moreover, lots of land is today of bad quality because of overuse. (Hörig 1995: 61-65).

When there is a scarcity of food because of bad harvests, the prices rise dramatically so that the peasants cannot afford essential grains. That is why until recently the Indian government kept their own stocks and regulated the prices. According to Vandana Shiva, an environmental activist, this kind of regulation has been forbidden by the World Bank as an illegitimate subsidy. Today 65 million tons of wheat 'pseudo-surplus' are rotting away while 300 million Indians are starving. Others, like Sharad Joshi, head of the peasants' union in the state of Maharashtra, defend liberalisation:

"Prices are artificially kept low because exports are only permitted up to a certain level. The government does not solve problems, it is itself the main problem", (Hörig 1995: 56).

But a study by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) dated 1994 came to the conclusion that the liberalisation of the Indian economy and the reduction of state subsidies only worsened the situation of the poor and reduced work opportunities. More than ever before, India is subject to the insecurities of the world economy. (Hörig 1995: 34).

A second group that is in a difficult situation is the 70 million Adivasis, the biggest indigenous population in the world. They live in areas that others call wilderness, for example in the Rajaji National Park at the foothills of the Himalayas. Their homes are being destroyed by mining, dams and industry or they are declared 'National Parks' where people are not permitted to live. Many Adivasis are today referred to as thieves who destroy the forest.

Every year 1.5 million hectares of forest are lost, leading to floods, erosion and drought in the valleys, because the forest is lost as a reservoir

that holds water on the sides of the mountains. The main reason for the destruction of the forests are state development projects and felling of trees for agricultural land to feed India's fast-growing population. Natural forests are also replaced by commercial monocultures of teak or eucalyptus. For the displaced Adivasi, who have their own religion, there is no place and little sympathy in the Indian caste system, so that they have to fight for their survival in city slums or as agricultural day labourers. (Hörig 1995: 84-97).

Following Gandhi's example, many voluntary organisations were founded in the seventies. Professionals moved from the cities to the countryside and worked with local communities in education, health and hygiene, water and rural development. In the eighties, the Indian government decided they could be useful as "service providers" for rural development and began to support NGO projects financially. Foreign donors also gave them money, especially after the decentralization of developmental aid at the end of the Cold War period. Thus many social organisations were founded and equipped. Today there are estimated to be more than 200,000.

One successful NGO is SOPHIA, which works with the Van Gujjar who live in Rajaji National Park. They are indigenous, nomadic Muslims. In winter, they live in the Shivalik forests at the foothills of the Himalaya, while in summer they migrate to higher regions. They keep buffaloes and sell their milk. They are dependent on this because they do not engage in agriculture. Their settlements are far away from roads so their access to health and educational facilities is severely hampered.

SOPHIA was founded in 1996 by Praveen Kaushal who had previously worked for the much larger NGO, RLEK (Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra), headed by his father. SOPHIA works exclusively with the Van Gujjar. In 1996, they started the programme "Self Help Milk Marketing", which works like a co-operative to ensure the Van Gujjar fair prices for their milk. Before this programme was initiated, they were heavily exploited by middlemen.

In 2001, the NGO made an evaluation of the health situation of the Van Gujjar. Following that, they held several health camps and established women's groups in which the women save money and talk about health problems. Some of the women were chosen to be trained as para health workers / birth attendants.

In 2004, the NGO started a new project. The idea was to make a plan with the Van Gujjar, in which they as a group prioritized their problems and worked out strategies to solve them in the long term. The focus was on empowering the Van Gujjar so that they could take up negotiations with the government themselves and argue for better access to health care centres and educational facilities.

Mira visited SOPHIA between the 21st and the 31st August 2004 and interviewed three field workers, an office worker and the founder as well as taking part in an employees' conference and reading articles, evaluations, project proposals and research accounts of former visitors. Two day-excursions were made to close-by settlements of those Van Gujjar who had not travelled to the summer camps and on one day, she travelled with the van of the Milk Marketing Programme.

Praveen Kaushal, commonly known as Manto, lives with his wife Jaya, his sons aged five and seven and his mother. The office worker Reena and her older sister, field worker Beena, live in the office. There is also a room for guests, as SOPHIA is sometimes visited by Swedish students. Pernille Gooch from Sweden wrote her PhD on the Van Gujjar in 1998 with Montoo as her assistant. Now some of her students occasionally come to do research there.

While Manto was with RLEK, he worked on a programme of informal education for the Van Gujjar that received a UNESCO prize and on winning the right-to-vote for the Van Gujjar. He also worked for a project supported by the UNDP and assisted the Swedish social anthropologist, Pernille Gooch, for three years with her PhD research into the Van Gujjar's situation, published in 1998 by the Department of Sociology of the University of Lund under the title "At the tail of the buffalo - Van Gujjar pastoralists between the forest and the world arena". Pernille and Moanto lived for a year and a half with the Van Gujjar.

In 1996 Manto left RLEK, which he had been expected to take over one day, because he had different ideas about how to organise the work. He then founded SOPHIA. Some of the donors who were working with RLEK also support SOPHIA now.

Manto is very open, caring and helpful towards both his guests and his employees. Some of them followed him when he left RLEK, even though they now earn less than half their former wage. Manto openly discusses strengths and

weaknesses, even of his own work, and is keen to know others' opinions. Mira was very impressed with the way his organisation is run.

The Van Gujjar speak Darhi, a language related to Punjabi, and very little Hindi. They are indigenous Muslims who live nomadically. In winter, they stay in the Shivalik forest between the rivers Ganga and Yamuna in the states of Uttaranchal and Uttar Pradesh. In summer, they migrate to higher regions in Himachal Pradesh and Uttaranchal. "Van" means "forest" in Hindi and signifies the close relationship between the Van Gujjar and the forest. They raise buffaloes that feed on the forest flora and they exchange their milk for agricultural produce or, more commonly these days, sell it. Since they do not farm the land, their financial situation is completely dependent on the price of milk. Their settlements are deep down in the forest at the side of dry river beds so their access to health centres and educational facilities is poor.

Social Structure:

Their villages are called *Khols* and consist of several *Dheras* or huts, in which the extended family lives. Compared to other disadvantaged groups, they are relatively well-off because they work independently, produce their own milk and their group is very tight-knit - they take care of each other. When one of them had an accident requiring an expensive operation, the others rallied round and lent him the money.

It is almost impossible to know which Van Gujjar are rich and which are poor, because they all wear similar clothes and eat simple food. The only way of telling their wealth is by counting the number of milk cans in front of their houses in the morning, because being wealthy means owning a lot of buffaloes. They do not have formal leaders but there are so-called *Panchos* who are respected, talk well and are usually wealthy. People turn to them when they have problems with each other. There are four or five of them in Timli and Mohan. Internal quarrels are mostly about land, male buffaloes or girls who have run away to get married. Everyone will meet to discuss the problem. There are also leaders who have been chosen by the government, but they are not liked since they mostly work as middlemen for bribes.

As a minority with a distinct religion and way of life, the Van Gujjar have a strong sense of their identity and great pride in it. But at the same time, they are afraid to be bad Muslims. Islamic missionaries from the Deoband Madrasa, who come to visit, tell them not to use contraceptives and to marry girls off at an early age.

Migration:

The annual migration of the Van Gujjar has become very difficult as their routes are now interrupted by streets and they have to cross different Indian states on their routes and pay bribes at every border in order to get their permits updated. Since most of them are illiterate, they do not know how to fight for their rights. When they are away in the summer, peasants sometimes settle on their land or the forest is cut down.

In the *dhera* of Meerali Lodha only a part of the extended family still migrates. The others feel there are too many problems: wild elephants, the rain, vans, small children and the lack of sufficient food and drink while travelling. Sometimes part of the family stays back to protect the land from intruders but the other Van Gujjar are unhappy about those who choose not to travel anymore, because they do not allow the forest the time it needs to regenerate.

Settling down:

It is very difficult for the Van Gujjar to settle down, because they do not have any knowledge about agriculture and do not collect vegetables or fruits from the forest either. Some of the *dheras* have small kitchen gardens with pumpkins, chillies, *kaddu*, *arabi* and *karela*, but they are not very impressive. Some were given land as compensation for settling down, but they rented it out and stayed in the forest instead. Many of those who have rented this land use a lot of chemicals and water to get the maximum profit in the shortest period of time, thus ruining the land.

Every day, the van of the Milk Marketing Programme collects the milk in Mohan, close to some of the Van Gujjar settlements. On average, it collects 800-1000 litres a day, which are sold in the afternoon in Dehradun. Since the Milk Marketing Programme started, the price of milk has risen much more than the inflation rate of the government food basket. The buffaloes are a good source of income because they need little input and feed on the forest while their output, the milk, is high quality, not contaminated by chemicals.

The Van Gujjar cut leaves from the trees to feed the buffaloes. They say it does not harm the trees, but rather helps them to grow straight and gives more light to the plants on the ground. Grass, especially two varieties called *Bhabhar* and *Gorla*, are also cut for fodder. However, villagers also come to the forest to cut grass and so it diminishes.

The price of milk at the moment is Rs17 per litre when sold to private consumers and a little less to dairies. The Van Gujjars earn about Rs10 per litre. They sell between two and ten litres a day, but on average only three litres, because not all buffaloes give milk on any given day and the young calves also need their share. Taxes have just been raised from Rs15 to Rs30 per buffalo.

Members of SOPHIA'S women's group regularly save money which they often keep for emergencies such as an operation in a private hospital in Dehra Dun. It used to be comparatively easy to accumulate savings in this way as the price of milk was much higher but now there is simply too much milk on the market as many villagers also sell it and they are much closer to the consumers. The buffaloes also give less milk nowadays because the forest does not provide enough fodder for them any more.

Some Van Gujjar keep cows, which need less fodder, but their milk also contains less fat so they earn less.

The Van Gujjars' population and that of the surrounding villages is growing at a rate that seems to be too much for the natural resources to support. This is one of the reasons why many already suffer from malnutrition. The Van Gujjar also used to practise contraception through a combination of abstinence and other practices, but not any more and now many women have a child almost every year.

A Van Gujjar woman raises on average four to five children. The population has increased so much that not all of them can stay in the forest if it is to be saved. In some areas, the population has grown from three families to fifty in only 50 years. The pill as a contraceptive method is only used by a few couples, whereas formerly the women used to get pregnant only every four or five years because they used methods to avoid contraception and the men practised some abstinence, which they are not willing to do any more. Some of SOPHIA's work may have had an unintended detrimental effect in this regard. The Van Gujjar men used to think that sexual intercourse would weaken them. SOPHIA told them that this was not true. They have also been influenced by Islamic missionary work in the region. The missionaries are strictly against contraception.

The children of the Van Gujjar are sometimes married at the tender age of nine, but the girls don't move in with their in-laws until later, usually when they are between 16 and 20. Men and women work approximately the same amount of

time daily. The women are lucky because their men do not drink. However, the monetarization of their economy has led to a loss of power for the women. Now that they do not exchange milk directly for food any more, the men handle the money. SOPHIA has founded women's groups which give them a reason to leave the house and meet. They also own small amounts of savings; on average the women save Rs10 a month. There are no government's groups working among the Van Gujjar because they are not officially listed as poor.

The Van Gujjars have little or no access to health care so SOPHIA has trained some of them as para health workers and birth attendants and made it a subject for discussion in the women's groups. When someone is seriously ill and needs an operation, they have to turn to doctors outside their settlements, which proves very expensive. They often have to take loans to be able to pay.

Malnutrition because of poverty and lack of information is also a big problem. The regular diet consists of chapattis and chutney. Fruits and vegetables, that cover the need for vitamins, are expensive, even for those who are not very poor. Most of the Van Gujjar are very thin – their food does not contain enough vitamins. Hygiene is generally good. It is discussed in the women's groups and the *dheras* are very clean.

With the support of various donors, SOPHIA organises health camps where vaccinations are given and doctors carry out examinations and hand out free medicines. The Van Gujjar are inclined to be careless in handling medicine. One mother bought four different medicines for her baby's stomach pain; the health worker explained that too much medicine could be harm a baby and that there were less harmful ways of helping the baby, e.g. giving her *karela* to eat, a nutritious fruit that grows in the forest.

Because the settlements of the Van Gujjar are in the forest, far away from streets or villages, it is difficult for them to travel far when someone is ill. On top of that, they do not know how to deal with outsiders and state employees and so they try to avoid contact with them, even with the health care centres. A study carried out by SOPHIA showed that the average Van Gujjar woman becomes pregnant nine times in her life. 20% of the children die before they are one year old and another 20% before they turn five. Another result of the study was that tuberculosis is widespread. There was no direct information on HIV infection but it is likely to be low because of the strict moral principles of the community. However, more and

more illnesses are coming in from the “outside” world.

Education:

The Van Gujjars have little or no access to schools and educational facilities because they are too far away from their settlements. Lack of education and knowledge puts them at the mercy of everyone who is even slightly more powerful or knowledgeable. They are easily influenced by political and religious leaders and they do not know their rights or have any information about government programmes from which they could benefit. Because they are illiterate, they have no way of gathering information. Even if they knew about programmes, they do not have the required identity cards nor the knowledge of how to apply.

Since nearly all the Van Gujjars are illiterate, they cannot teach their children reading, writing or calculating. Most schools are far away from the settlements and the parents are afraid to send their children through the forest. They could be attacked by wild animals – elephants are very dangerous – or kidnapped. Still, they all realise how important education is for their children. If they do not learn, they won't even know if they have been given the right milk price. Those who live close to Mohan, where the milk is collected, can send their children to the RLEK Blue Star Primary School that teaches 150 to 200 children in summer. Most of them are Van Gujjars but the locals also prefer to send their children there rather than to the public school down the street, because the teachers there attend more regularly. Education is the crucial factor. Without it, the Van Gujjars will always have to ask someone about every minor detail. Without education, they can never be independent. As illiterate people, they do not know about family planning or government programmes. They do not know those bureaucrats who work for the Block Development Office; they never talk to them, even though they could help identify the villagers who illegally fell trees.

It is almost impossible for the Van Gujjars to fight for their rights, like education, health care and fair treatment in a formalised, written world that does not have sympathy for them. Rights are made for those who know how to handle the procedures. Illiterates like the Van Gujjars are at the mercy of all those who are more knowledgeable or powerful, e.g. police officers or forest guards. They do not know their rights; they can not read about them, they can not document events when something is done to them. If they are hurt by a car or van, they cannot even note down the numbers on the plate. In short, they do not have

any idea how to handle this formalised world. It is not enough to put down rights in law. Those who make the laws have to think of ways to make these rights accessible to the powerless. As part of its new participatory programme, SOPHIA wants to help the Van Gujjars to get an education so that they can fight for the rights the state guarantees them like education and health care.

Politicians and Bureaucrats:

Hardly any Van Gujjars have passports. Their only proof of identity is proof of residence or the report card or ration card with which a person is eligible to buy cheaper food items. When they try to obtain these documents, the Van Gujjars depend on bureaucrats who are seldom helpful and often corrupt.

Another problem is that they do not have permits for all their buffaloes so they often have to bribe the officers who protect the forest or guard the state frontiers. The permits they have were given to them years ago for the number of buffaloes their families then had. There are a lot more buffaloes today, so several grandsons now share one permit handed down to them by their grandfathers. At every state frontier, they have to bribe the officers. Forest officials estimate that the Van Gujjars only have permits for 10% of their buffaloes. The Van Gujjars themselves estimate that they spend 25% of their income on medicine and additional food for the buffaloes, 25% on humans and 50% on bribes to low ranking officers.

Typically, when the milk van passes the state frontier between Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal, it is stopped and the officers ask for tax, even though milk is exempt. The SOPHIA team have already anticipated this and instead hand them a paper that has already been filled in. The officers ask for Rs10 as a service charge, but the team refuses unless they give him a receipt in return. Only then are they able to continue without paying.

Some of the forest officers charge Rs100 when they see a Van Gujjars cutting *Bhabar Gras*, even though the villagers do not have to pay this fine. SOPHIA encourages them to gather together to talk to the forest officer and offers to check whether cutting *Bhabar Gras* is actually forbidden. If the Van Gujjars organise themselves to meet the officers, one of the SOPHIA workers will accompany them.

It is important for the Van Gujjars to get ration cards from the state to buy cheaper food items and also to use them as ID cards. The state-run

Block Development Office has just counted the inhabitants of the region prior to issuing new ration cards, but most Van Gujjars were in the mountains at that time. Another problem is that taxes have just been doubled from Rs15 to Rs30 per buffalo and the Van Gujjar are very upset about this. It seems to them that all politicians lie and keep for themselves the money meant for the poor. The Van Gujjar also have problems with the village councils. They would like SOPHIA to help but this is a case where the organisation's intervention would be difficult.

Manto feels that there are different ways of working in a political sense. By running campaigns with a charismatic leader, the media's attention can be captured for a short time, but little is gained in the long term. Instead, he wants to help the Van Gujjar to organise themselves and fight for their rights to land, voting, ration cards and birth registration. In the long run, they should not be dependent on "brokers" anymore, but should be able to deal with government agencies and civil society organisations themselves.

In recent years, new companies have been established in the Van Gujjars' forest. They offer employment opportunities locally, but they also pollute the environment. The forest is cut down to make way for big plantations of teak and eucalyptus. A regular wage for a labourer is between Rs50 and Rs75 daily, but the men who cut trees illegally earn up to Rs2000 per tree. Another part of the forest the Van Gujjar used to live in has now been declared a National Park in which people are not allowed to reside anymore.

Cutting down the forest:

Cutting down the forest and converting it into plantations has divided the Van Gujjars' settlement area into isolated isles. Teak and eucalyptus, the trees that are grown in the plantations, drain the soil and use a great deal of water. They are cut down by the villagers both legally and illegally. The attraction is understandable. Rs2000 per tree is a lot of money in a region where Rs72 a day is the official minimum wage, making a monthly salary of Rs1400 for a five day week. In the last 20 years, the forest has been decimated. If it perishes, so will the lifestyle of the Van Gujjar.

National Park:

In 1983, the Indian government proposed that 820 sq kms of the Shivalik forest should become a National Park for the protection of elephants and tigers. A large number of forest officers now protect the park. Some of the Van Gujjar have been resettled, 450 in one settlement and 80 in

another while about 1000 still live in the park. When they return from their summer camps between the end of September and the beginning of October, there are always conflicts between them and the forest officers. More and more of them have now decided to settle down, because staying in the forest gets more difficult every day.

Every family has received one hectare of land as compensation for leaving the forest. They have given their buffaloes to other Van Gujjar or had them slaughtered. Some still keep their buffaloes in the forest and bribe the officers.

Development Aid:

Development aid means applying for financial support for a limited period of time and abiding by the donor's conditions. It is important to have quite a high standard of written formal English and to know the philosophies of the donors. Their preferences and conditions decide which projects will be realized and which will not.

SOPHIA is supported by various Swedish donors. Manto applies for projects, edits reports and tries to keep up to date with donor philosophies as well as with development issues in general. He is currently applying for a new project which is highly participatory. None of the other workers can help him; not only do they lack sufficient knowledge of the English language but they don't know or understand donor and development philosophies. Manto writes reports for the donors on how they have used their money and these reports form the base of trust and continued co-operation, even though the ability to write reports in the way that donors like them does not in itself say anything about the ability to do good work. But donors are the ones with all the power in the relationship and so the other side has to give whatever is wanted of them. The result is not always the best for development. For example, the Swedish donor agency has decided to teach organic farming to those Van Gujjar who have settled down on the land they received as compensation, but what the donors could have done was ask SOPHIA what the Van Gujjars' most urgent need was. A more dynamic relationship involving the joint development of new projects and evaluations and an equal partnership might open up all sorts of exciting possibilities.

The Van Gujjar complain that all projects run for their benefit only last for a very short period of time. This seems to be one of the basic problems of development. Even a well thought out, prize-winning programme like RLEK's non-formal education for the Van Gujjar, where trust had to be built up and problems overcome, nevertheless,

after a short period of time, it was over; it was not possible to make it financially sustainable because the Van Gujjar could not contribute enough money themselves and donors always insist that long-term projects be financially sustainable. Yet this project was very successful and the experiences gained from it have just been wasted. This is what makes it difficult to work on long-term strategies. Often those projects that are most useful to the beneficiaries are ones that cannot be designed to become financially sustainable in a short period of time. Consequently, SOPHIA does not work on projects like non-formal education any more, however much sense they make, but instead tries to work for the general empowerment of the Van Gujjar to enable them to find long-term solutions for themselves in co-operation with the government rather than being dependent on short-term projects that keep letting them down after a few years. It remains to be seen whether this strategy will work, given the level of indifference of the bureaucrats and the high level of corruption.

Responsibilities:

SOPHIA puts responsibility in the hands of the politicians who are corrupt and who do not know anything about the problems of development; it also holds the poor partly responsible because they do not take any initiative themselves.

The situation has significantly worsened in the last five to ten years, though it probably started 20 years ago when the government decided that the Van Gujjar would have to leave the area to make way for the Rajaji National Park, because they did not have any legal right to the land. The problems increase as population growth increases, because the decimation of the forest is relative as well as absolute. The financial interests of those who cut the trees are also responsible. Other problems include sicknesses from the outside world. The financial situation is bad, because the Van Gujjar can no longer simply exchange their milk for food items, but have to sell it and cope with comparatively high prices of vegetables and fruits. The Islamic missionaries, who are strictly opposed to family planning, have also become more influential. The Van Gujjar listen to all those who try to influence them; they are highly insecure and think they do not know anything, even though they used to be proud and independent in former times.

The government:

It is likely that the government always knew approximately how many Van Gujjar lived in the forest, because they counted them at regular intervals. Still, they never attempted to keep their

promise of providing education and health care to everyone. Politicians ignore the Van Gujjar because they are so few that their votes are not considered important. Ultimately, the national government is responsible because in India everything is decided top-down. There is no contact between those in power and the Van Gujjar, who do not have anyone to turn to. Those in power know nothing about them and have no interest in knowing. People do not like them because they are uneducated and badly dressed. The public, the bureaucrats and the markets are simply not interested in minorities.

Priorities:

The Van Gujjar want to have schools and health centres in their vicinity but most of all, they want to continue living in the forest even though they know that it will become increasingly difficult. That is why they want to have legal rights to the land their ancestors lived on. They also want to have political leaders from their own group. Many want family planning; others complain about the falling milk price as well as about the rain. SOPHIA tries to make it clear to them that they have to agree upon priorities among themselves and thereafter work out strategies to tackle them. Most of them want to be supplied with water so that they can cultivate kitchen gardens.

Those who want to continue to migrate, don't need much education because it would not help them. There are already too many educated, unemployed young people. Instead, they could profit from their knowledge of milk production and thus secure their place in society. There is a need for differentiated solutions, so that the Van Gujjar can choose for themselves. Those who want to settle down want to have land that borders the forest so that they can continue to use it. Most Van Gujjar still cannot imagine leaving the forest. They want to continue to live as before. They want their children to stay in the forest but also have a school close by. One of them has a plan to build a school for the children in their village. SOPHIA would help them think about where teaching materials and teachers could come from. Maybe they could get government support.

Others want better health care; some want new permits, even though they do not travel any more. One of the women who has been trained as a birth attendant has very high expectations. She wants SOPHIA to take care of everything and provide her with land rights as well as with a doctor. Her home is the only one that is not clean and neat, but rather dirty. SOPHIA workers tell them that the organisation cannot do everything on their behalf and suggest that they organise

meetings and form committees that agree on a list of ten to fifteen problems and prioritise them.

Organisation:

SOPHIA has thirteen employees at the moment: the head of the NGO, the office manager, the field workers and the field coordinator. There are also a doctor and a nurse, who work when they are needed. The Milk Marketing Programme consists of the driver, the co-ordinator and the attendant. Their unit is financially and organisationally independent.

Each day, every worker has to write down what he has done. Their duties are laid down in their job descriptions and everyone gives a report in the monthly meeting on what he has done and achieved and what problems have come up. They also talk about new ideas and plans for the future. The field workers meet the co-ordinator every fortnight to talk about their experiences and the next two weeks. Everyone takes his job very seriously; they are all very committed and work hard for the goals they have set themselves. If someone comes late to a meeting, even if it is just one minute, he has to give the others a treat. During the month, topics and ideas to be discussed in the meeting are noted down. They are then discussed in the order in which they have been written down. The employees also attend courses at regular intervals. There is a board made up of the founding members, among them one social worker and two Van Gujjar. They meet twice a year and decide on basic guidelines. They form finance and human resource committees that meet four times a year.

Participation

SOPHIA is working on a new strategy called "Participatory Conflict Management". Donors and civil society both ask for participatory programmes. Manto has also started questioning whether it is right to finance the Van Gujjar's health care with foreign money and thus free the state from its responsibility. Instead, he wants to see SOPHIA as a human rights organisation that helps the Van Gujjar get what the state has promised its citizens. He wants to empower the Van Gujjar to make their own decisions and fight for their rights. They have to decide what they want, knowing that not all of them will be able to stay in the forest in the long run.

During the first phase of the new participatory project, the field workers ask the Van Gujjar in informal talks what problems are most urgent for them. Then they talk to the women's groups. After that, the Van Gujjar are asked (first individually, then in groups and finally in a community meeting)

to choose able men and women that SOPHIA will educate so that they can become leaders of their community. There will be a secret election, something the Van Gujjar have specifically asked for, because it is difficult to them to stick to their opinions in the face of group pressure. Sometimes they raise their hands, but shake them at the same time to signify that they actually mean no! Overall, the aim is to empower the Van Gujjar so that in the end they will be able to approach government agencies themselves to argue for their rights and not be dependent any more on projects that end after a few years.

Reference:

Hörig, Rainer 1995: "Auf Gandhis Spuren - Soziale Bewegungen und ökologische Tradition in Indien", (translated: "On Gandhi's trails - Social Movements and Ecological Traditions in India") published by Verlag C. H. Beck, München