

Land, Dignity, and Justice: Single Women's Struggles in Uttarakhand – A Conversation with Renu Thakur

Vinod Koshti (VK): Welcome to Indian Ocean, a podcast series by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, where we bring voices, struggles, and stories from South Asia that shape our collective journey towards justice, equity, and dignity. In today's episode, we will explore the often invisible but deeply complex world of single women in rural and hilly areas of India, especially in Uttarakhand, examining their struggles for land rights, dignity, and social recognition. To guide us through this conversation, I am joined by Renu Thakur, a long-term grassroots activist and the founder of ARPAN, an organisation that has been working for over three decades in the hilly region, particularly with single farmers, single women farmers, single women, and the indigenous community. Welcome, Renuji. It's a pleasure to have you here. So let's start with something very foundational. When we talk about single women in rural areas, who exactly are we referring to? And why do you think it's so important to look at their rights as a separate issue?

Renu Thakur (RT): Single women is a term which is coined by the government, actually, because they want to identify them as per their schemes that they come out with. So the single women are mostly the widowed, the deserted, the separated, and the ones who have not married. And generally, in terms of the government schemes, it is for those 40 years and above. The women who have not married come under the category of single. And in our hilly regions here, we also have the missing husbands. So all these women come under the category of single women. Otherwise, we, as feminists, feel that we may be single, but we are not alone. That is how we look at single women. The situation of these single women is very pathetic when we look into the rural areas and the marginalised, the different SC/ST, these categories.

VK: SC/ST means the Scheduled Tribe/Scheduled Caste, the indigenous communities and the backwards communities.

RT: Therefore, we also looked at them as not only single women, but also worked with all other women, and we put them under the category of multiply marginalised women.

VK: Multiply marginalised women.

RT: So they could be one of the focus areas of our work.

VK: So I'm just curious, how did Arpan come to focus on the issues faced by single women, and what was your journey like when it comes to working on gender justice?

RT: Yes, this is an interesting and long journey that we have now reached in this position. Around three decades ago, when Arpan began its work here, the focus was on women's empowerment. But within women's empowerment, we came across a lot of women who are facing violence, discrimination and mostly domestic violence. So we started addressing these issues because there were women who were thrown out of their houses and from the maternal home to the in-laws' place. We came across many women in that way. And we call them

survivors of violence. There's a lot of human trafficking over here, those women we came across. So, we started addressing these issues by taking their cases to the legal front, as women often don't want to go to the police station or utilise the legal redressal mechanism. So we started calling the in-laws, the parents and counselling. This has been going on for a very long time. Then the realisation came that this will never end. Every time the same thing came up again and again. What was lacking? Why are women in this status? Thus, the issue of land rights arose. It was a realisation that we women don't have stability. And stability comes when there is some asset, some land in our name. So we started working on that. In general, for women, there was a backlash because earlier, there was a backlash based on the question of domestic violence. Now, you're saying that women should get land. [They said] you are destroying the family structure.

Then we conducted a small survey among single women to gauge their status. And it was very pathetic. The widowed, the missing husbands, we also didn't know that there are so many missing husbands, women over here, whose husbands have gone out for work and they have never returned. And she keeps waiting. Then we addressed women's and land rights for single women.

VK: Yeah, I mean, that's an interesting journey you have covered. And we hear a lot about land rights in the policy spaces. But why do they matter so much, especially for women and more so for single women?

RT: That is a very important question to be addressed, as we often overlook this matter.

All gender issues, all soft gender issues like are men and women working equally in MGNREGA [Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: A social security law in India that guarantees 100 days of wage employment per year to every rural household willing to do unskilled manual work, aimed at enhancing livelihood security and rural development], are they getting equal wages and things like that. But the hardcore issue of gender is: do men and women have equal land rights?

Because land is associated with a man within the patriarchy, he is the owner. He has the power. Land donates a lot of things. It is not only an asset, but it also gives us security, especially when I'm talking in terms of women and single women, it gives us security. It provides us recognition, identity, and a constant livelihood. If I don't have land and I'm a single woman, I'm thrown out of my house, then where do I go? That is why we raised the issue of equal land rights for women.

As I mentioned, we surveyed this issue and found many women in extremely difficult situations. And most of all, they don't have access to government schemes because they don't have documents. Because unless you have a land record in your name, you are not going to get the PM Kisan Samman Yojana. You're not going to get that housing scheme; it is only given to those who have the land records in their name.

VK: So, you're saying that all government schemes are attached to the land records, and the person whose name appears in the records, whether it is a man or a woman.

RT: Yes, many of the schemes are basically for agriculture and housing. Because the PM Kisan Yojana is linked to the agriculture scheme.

VK: PM Kisan Yojana is a scheme for the farmers who receive Rs. 6,000 [approximately 60 Euros] per year as a subsidy for their agriculture.

RT: Women are not receiving it because they don't have that land in their name.

VK: So, even if there is a woman farmer, they won't get this scheme unless they have land in their name.

RT: It is a very interesting thing, which you said, "Woman farmer". But who is a farmer, actually? So, we went about all this to create a narrative and ecosystem that asks, "Who is a farmer?" And everyone said, "Of course, she's a farmer. She does everything." But in the record, she is not coined as a farmer. She is not there as a farmer. The husband's name is a farmer. So, we started with the idea that if she is a farmer, she works so much in the fields, 80% of our women are into farming in the hilly regions. And she has nothing in her name.

VK: Yeah, that's true because agriculture is not only about tilling the land, it's also about the allied functions, which include cattle rearing, producing seeds, saving seeds, and small tasks like weeding, crushing, and harvesting. The farmers do all this work. Men only come into the picture when it is about growing the field and selling the harvest.

So, rest, all the things are taken care of by the women. So, that's an interesting point, which we have raised, that women should be considered as strongly as farmers, not only men.

So, that really highlights the depth of the issue. I understand that the land rights aren't just about ownership, they're about agency, security and recognition too.

And, Renuji, do you have a story that brings all these dimensions together? Maybe someone Arpan has worked with.

RT: Yes, of course. I would like to share some data here, as it is linked to our policy and interventions that we are currently working on in District Pithoragarh, in Uttarakhand. Across three blocks, we have around 45 women's collectives. We call them women's rights collectives. Within them, we currently have around five exclusively single women who are collectives. Now, why so few? I'll come to that first, because in any village, we are very scattered, and our population is also scattered throughout the hills. In one village, we may have three women, four women. So, we have combined them with the other women's groups. And, until last year, around 200 women had been linked to the scheme of land rights, specifically the law of land rights. And now they are availing the P[rime] M[inister] Kisan Yojana scheme, and they've got their housing. In this reference, of course, there are many cases, but I would like to share one case study.

There is a female by the name of Nanda in one of her villages in the district of Pithoragarh. She was around 35 years old when she lost her husband. She didn't have any children. So, she adopted a baby girl. She adopted her daughter when her husband was alive. And after her husband's death, they had a small house where they were staying with the in-laws, including her husband's brother.

VK: So, it was a joint family where the husband, wife, the husband's brother, and the parents-in-law all lived together.

RT: Yeah, it was a small house, barely two rooms on some land. After the husband's death, this lady was being harassed at home. She was harassed because she would demand land or something. So, they started harassing her so much that she would go away. Her parental home was also very far away, and again, over there, she came from a Scheduled Caste family and a BPL family, which was very poor.

VK: BPL means?

RT: Below the Poverty Line. So, she was struggling over there with her daughter. This was the reason she stepped out; otherwise, she would have been working there, staying, and tolerating the harassment. The elder brother of this husband started sexually abusing her.

Once, when we continued with capacity building and awareness, we held a capacity building workshop for single women in our organisation. We had also invited lawyers and the revenue officer, the patwari. This woman came over here and she attended that. Whatever learnings she had, she went back and reflected on those things, and again, she called us back. So, there is a women's collective over there. We asked her to go there and discuss everything, and we also went to that collective. There she put her problem. She said, "Now it is too much. I can't tolerate that. My daughter is also here, and they are abusing me, sexually abusing me. I heard about this. Can I also get land?"

She didn't have the information. This is one of the basic problems that women do not have information. We have the laws, but there is a complete lack of implementation of these laws. And so, we helped this woman with it, and she got the mutation done. And today, that land is in her name, and after that, she started getting the PM Kisan Samman Yojana of 6,000 per year. Besides that, now she has been provided by the social welfare board. So, she has a house of her own. So, she very proudly says, "This is my house and I am earning a livelihood from mine."

There are many cases like this where women are coming forward, and we are disseminating information about them. But what I wanted to say is, I think these are the collectives, these are the women through whom the advocacy, the voice will be raised that there are laws. But the patriarchal mindset within the system who are sitting there to give us those rights is the main obstruction over there. Therefore, we still believe that the government must take action, which should be relatively straightforward. Similar to the 2000 amendment, the 2005 amendment to land laws states that daughters and sons will have equal rights to family property. But the people sitting in those systems, starting right from my home, are not willing to give up.

VK: So, this is a really very powerful story which you have shared with us. Thank you for sharing this story. This really shows how discrimination is often hidden in our everyday systems and how the violence and the abuse are also very much prevalent in our families. And based on your experience, what are the bigger policy gaps that keep single women from accessing rights, if we talk about the policy framework?

RT: Yes, there are many laws.

Now, when we activists discuss laws, we say there are two types of laws. One set is social laws, based on the patriarchal system. And the foundation of this is religion, which we are not going to break, and we are trapped in it. The second are the legal laws, which are directly associated with the courts. We believe that there are laws, and amendments have been made to these laws, but social laws often override our legal laws. They're both trapped. The men and the women are both trapped in that. So, that is the biggest obstruction that we have. If you directly ask me what the way out of the solution is, it is difficult to say so. Because then we have to make interventions, both educational and awareness-based, to help people get out of the patriarchal mindset. And then they only go into these legal laws. Because if I want to land for my brother, I will not fight with my brother, because then the home dynamics will spoil, and my brother is not going to talk to me. So, what we have done is, as if I talk in reference to Uttarakhand, in the year 2000, we separated from UP and became an independent state. And till now, we don't have a women's policy over here. So, Arpan was part of drafting that women's policy. We have included a single chapter on women's policy and single women's rights, where we have outlined the law that allows women to access this information easily. But then again, I would say that it is a very long struggle because it is in the hands of the government, in the hands of the people, a structure that, despite being built on laws, we are unable to establish. So, we advocate for these in different ways. Like the women have to speak, the survivors have to speak. Besides generating awareness, we conduct programs that interface with various stakeholders, inviting government officials, including revenue officers, police, and lawyers from the court. So, they listen directly to the women, and the women can speak directly to them. And, they feel bold and empowered. "See, I am talking to an officer, and I know this." So, these are the interventions, small interventions we are making. But we would say at the state level, at the national level and global level, there should be a mass call for it. There we can raise our voices.

VK: Yeah, that's really a very interesting way of putting things that there may be legal frameworks, there may be normative frameworks, but unless and until there is a social change, there is a change at the social level and the level of the thinking and the mindset, we won't be able to achieve those. So, it's a long struggle that you have been waging, and it's the right call internationally that women's land rights are one of the most pressing topics. And until there is a recognition of the land rights for the women, the call for justice and equality and all these rings hollow.

And rightly said, Renuji, "single but not alone." That's such a powerful way to frame it. Thank you for all these deep insights and for the incredible work you and your team are doing and continue to do. The struggles of single women, especially in rural and indigenous areas, aren't

just about accessing individual rights, but really about reshaping our understanding of justice in a system that often overlooks the most vulnerable population.

We hope this episode helped bring attention to the critical, often overlooked issue. We would love to hear your thoughts. Until next time, stay tuned and join us for the next episode of Indian Ocean. Thank you.

This is a lightly edited version of the conversation between Vinod Koshti and Renu Thakur.