

## Jyoti Parikh: Home and hearth

Jyoti Parikh / New Delhi October 13, 2005

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### **Women in India should be more assertive regarding their fuel needs.**

Fifty eight years after independence, Indian women still toil daily to collect fuelwood, crop residues and animal dung - together known variously as biomass based cooking fuels, non-commercial fuels or traditional fuels. These fuels still provide 80% to 90% of the energy needs in rural areas. While one part of our society is marching in 21<sup>st</sup> century along the frontiers of nuclear, space and information technology, little impact is made on the lives of women who live in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, if not in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Is it such a formidable problem to provide clean fuels or do we not care?

The 2001 census finds nearly 700 million people without access to modern energy. Nearly 300 million people do not have access to electricity, but what is more, even larger number viz 625 million do not have access to modern (cooking) fuels. Why should that be so when it takes more investment, management and technology (IMT) skills to provide electricity than modern fuels? Partly it is because the trained engineers supported by the Ministry of Power and the Governments found political support to carry out this difficult mission. Moreover, men, and perhaps women too demanded it. In contrast, this '*other energy system*', one-third of India's total energy, is 'managed' mostly by women with too little inputs of investment, management or technology (IMT) and no political or administrative backing. Can we help these women energy suppliers or "managers" without taking this role away from them but instead provide them IMT and improve their lives?

A recent study by Integrated Research and Action for Development (IRADe) showed that in Himachal Pradesh, a relatively better off state with more penetration of LPG and kerosene, women walk every month 30 kilometers, spending 40 hours during 15 trips, each of about 2 kms to fetch fuels. This burden, which is bigger in other states, causes backache (50%), neckache, and headache and bruises every week (80 %) and most of the women have encounters with wild animals and snakes every quarter. These statistics are hard to come by and we had to collect it. Health and other problems associated with "searching, gathering and transporting" have received much less attention than the problems from cooking with them.

Cooking with these fuels causes health impact, especially for women and children, as they emit a variety of pollutants in their close proximity often in poorly ventilated kitchens. It is estimated by us that 19% persons in HP have some symptoms. Can we at least see this as an economic problem, if not a health problem, or a drudgery problem? Nearly 3 billion days are spent in gathering fuels and 700 million days in processing them i.e., chopping, drying, turning, storing, stacking and handling. About 800 million days are spent due to diseases. Add to these 12 billion days to fetch water and water related diseases. What economic value can we put on 16.5 billion days? None – same skeptics may say. Can a nation continue to achieve 8% economic growth, if this is how billion of hours are spent by nearly 30% to 40% of its population?

These problems have to be addressed if we were to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDG), to eradicate poverty and hunger, (energy is needed for cooking and livelihoods), achieve universal primary education (girls often do not go to school to help their mothers with their chores), reduce infant mortality and maternal deaths (heavy loads and indoor pollution add to this health burden) promote gender equality and empower women.

What can be done?

IRADe has suggested that to start with, India needs a political commitment to set a goal. For example, biomass should be easily available within one km of any village to reduce hardship in carrying heavy loads. Alternatively, kerosene or LPG should be available within reasonable proximity. A mission similar to 'Rajiv Gandhi Mission for drinking water' that tried to bring the water within one km in rural areas after many years of work needs to be undertaken for bringing fuels closer to people.

For example, women's groups can form tree-growing co-operatives for fuel wood or oil seed plantations with the same efforts that they put in searching and gathering fuelwood to develop sustainable energy supply. They can determine what energy sources such as wood, agricultural residues, animal dung, oil seeds, solar, biogas, LPG or kerosene could be available at least cost and effort. After examining this, user groups can also identify land and the type of plantation (e.g., wood, oilseed, agriculture etc.) that will serve the purpose. The involvement of Panchayats and other local bodies is necessary to provide enabling policy environment. Even transportation problem can be addressed in a systematic manner, if the supply is located in one place. A policy can be formulated to accommodate such a program under various existing poverty alleviation schemes including the new employment guarantee and other Bharat Nirman schemes.

One needs to go beyond cooking energy and extend the scope to income generating or livelihood activities. Both rural and urban women need adequate energy supplies for their small- and medium- scale enterprises and home industries. Many of these informal sector activities are highly fuel-intensive, and their viability and costs are affected by energy prices and availabilities. Examples of energy-sensitive micro enterprises by women include: food-processing industries such as oil milling, flour milling, cleaning, grading and packaging of agricultural produce, kitchen gardens, charcoal making; kiln using and manufacturing activities. Because fuel is a significant cost factor, there is a commercial motivation to improve the efficiency of the entire process.

A paradigm shift is also necessary to change from a 'subsidy mindset' to micro credits and loans. The aim should be to use Self Help Groups (SHG) for micro-enterprise development that may be by either users of energy or suppliers or both.

The role of women as energy provider can be transformed into a suitable micro enterprise if they can manage fuel wood or oil seed plantations, dispense kerosene or LPG, assemble solar panels, build cook stoves to brick kilns and even manage electricity distribution and bill collection. New opportunities for sustainable technologies can be availed of with necessary resources to allow them to participate in the formulation and implementation of energy programmes and policies.

"Indhan(fuel), pani(water), bijlee(electricity)" should be given political priority instead of only "electricity-water". It is surprising that in a democratic set up women have not yet asserted on this issue. Are they too busy collecting wood or too remote to vote or not aware

that their lives can be different and have accepted it as fate? In all of the above cases, democracy has failed them. We hope for their awakening so that the next election could mean beginning of the end to lifelong drudgery. But before that, hopefully the current Government will also address this problem of “Aam Aurat”.

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