

ROPE-MAKING

The Tightening Noose

ON SUMMER nights all over north India, people put out hundreds of thousands of cots in the open air to sleep on. Most of the cots are made of rope strung on a wooden frame, and almost all of the rope comes from Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh. Rope-making in Saharanpur is a traditional skill dating from the Mughal era; the rope, or *baan* is painstakingly twisted and woven from the *bhabhar* grass (*Eulaliopsis binata*) which grows tall and wild in the Shivalik foothills, a natural forest product that produces an unchecked and fresh crop every year.

Close to 40,000 families in this arid region, a belt of land 8 km wide and 60 km long and bordered by the Yamuna on the west and the Ganga on the east, depend almost entirely on rope-making for their livelihood. Slowly and inexorably, however, more and more of the rope-makers, who belong to the lowly Harijan cobbler caste or the backward 'Bandookchi' Muslims, are being squeezed into destitution, or migration to other areas in search of labour.

Vanishing Industry: The slow dying of the Saharanpur *baan* industry has been induced by the Uttar Pradesh Government's Forest Corporation, a body that is supposed to protect traditional forest-based industry, and a combination of forest contractors, middlemen, and a powerful clique of rope traders from Saharanpur. "In the old days," remembers Jyoti Ram of Sherpur Pelo village, "we used to go into the jungle and cut ourselves as much *bhabhar* grass as we needed. Then the Government put a price on nature's bounty."

That was in 1951, when the Forest Act brought all forests under the Government's exclusive control. For three decades thereafter, the Government leased out big chunks of forest called *khols* to contractors, who hired labourers to cut the grass. The contractors then sold the grass on credit to middlemen throughout the *baan*-producing region, who in turn sold it on

credit to the village rope-makers. At every level there was profit to be made, and the rope-maker was suddenly forced to pay nearly treble the old price for the *bhabhar* grass.

"An average family of five members, working from dawn to dusk, produces roughly 100 kg of rope every fortnight," says Sanjaya Garg, general secretary of the Vikalp Social Organisation, which has been working to better the rope-makers' lot since 1979. "The rope is then sold at weekly markets at Daoudpura and Biharigarh, close to Saharanpur. Few rope-makers' families earned more than Rs 125 a month about four years ago."

At the markets, the rope-makers are

compelled to take whatever price has been fixed by the Saharanpur traders, for money is always desperately short.

In late 1980, after months of patient persuasion, Vikalp activists succeeded in getting 12 villagers from Mirzapur Pole to come together and set up the Baan Utpadak Samiti. Rope-makers throughout the region had been very suspicious of cooperative societies after their experience of the artisans' collective set up by the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC). The KVIC-sponsored societies had been largely defunct for years, and the rope-makers had lost even their share money to the mysterious loss-making process of the governmental body. Eventually,

however, the Mirzapur Pole villagers realised that they could only hope to eliminate the middlemen if they crafted a collective strength. Pitching in seed capital of Rs 100 each, the 12 'pioneers' began to buy *bhabhar* grass directly from the forest contractors on cash terms. Immediately, their bargaining power shot up, and they procured better grass at prices 30 per cent lower than the middlemen's.

Collective Strength: When the monsoon came in 1981, the Samiti rope-makers faced another annual peril—the prospect of stocking up enough grass to last through the wet season. They took a bank loan of Rs 18,000, used the money collectively to buy grass in bulk, stored it centrally, and repaid the loan fully after a mere six months. By last year the Samiti's membership had expanded to 47, and the bank gladly gave a loan of Rs 1.41 lakh—which was again repaid. When the Government's Integrated Rural Development Project (IRDP), through the District Development Agency, sanctioned a subsidy of Rs 55,000 to the Samiti members, each member put Rs 500 in a fund that is being used to build an office and a storage shed for the grass. "We cut out the middlemen," says Sumer Chand of Shahpur Gadda, one of the original Samiti members, "and it felt better when we worked to-



Grass weavers at Saharanpur: bleak future

gether. My family used to earn only Rs 100 a month before the Samiti was formed, and now we earn almost double."

"Here again we ran up against the Government's counter-productive laws," says Vikalp's Ganesh Prasad. Uttar Pradesh's cooperative laws stipulate that artisans' cooperatives can be formed only through governmental departments, either the District Industrial Centres or the KVIC.

The cruellest blow was yet to be administered. Last year, the Uttar Pradesh Government decided that forest contractors were indulging in too many malpractices in regard to timber cutting. It therefore imposed a 10-year ban on the felling of timber, and directed that all forest products would be sold exclusively by the Uttar Pradesh Forest Corporation. In the months since, the Corporation has proved to be just another middleman in the exploitative chain throttling the rope-makers.

THE MECHANICS of the Corporation's entry have been catastrophic for the rope-makers. Earlier, the contractors used to pay grass-cutting labour an average wage of Rs 17 per quintal (100 kg) of grass. Now the contractors are paid an average of Rs 32 per quintal by the Corporation to get the grass cut; they pay the labourers the old wages, do not have to worry about selling the grass, no longer take care to see that the grass is cut and stored properly, and since each *khol* yields at least 10,000 quintals of grass, make a tidy profit of Rs 1.5 lakh each.

"The Corporation, we thought, would eliminate the middlemen," mourns Hari Chand of Purda Khera village. "Instead, look at what it has done. The contractors now carelessly put wet grass with dry stock, and much of the grass is therefore blackened and fungoid when we get it. Earlier a quintal of grass actually contained 120 kg and we could produce about 90 kg of rope from it. Now we get inferior grass and rarely get more than 60 kg of rope from a quintal of grass."

Earnings have therefore dropped to alarmingly low levels throughout the Gaarh region. Production this year has averaged only 25 per cent of previous levels; the rope-makers cannot buy grass in bulk at the Corporation's auctions, and so it is still being bought by the middlemen, who continue to sell it on credit to the rope-makers. The Corporation has therefore become another middleman.

Discontent: Last fortnight, the Corporation's depot at Badshahi Bagh was strewn with unsold piles of unprotected *bhabhar*, slowly decomposing in the heat. Ashok Dabral, who is in-charge of the depot, said that the grass was being sold at an average of

Rs 72.50 per quintal to the middlemen. Conversely, however, the ceiling price of the grass sold to paper mills—the major customer is the Ballarpur Paper Mill at Yamunanagar in Haryana—is only Rs 40 per quintal. "The Corporation does not allow us to choose good grass," says the Baan Utpadak Samiti's Sumer Chand, "and we have to buy whatever we get, even though the Samiti can, unlike unorganised rope-makers, buy directly from the depots. So we have had to buy inferior grass from as far away as Haryana. More and more men throughout this region are now being forced to work on gangs breaking stones for road-building contractors so that the little they earn there can augment their families' income."

The Corporation's entry into the grass trade has helped sharpen the rope-makers' consciousness of collective strength. Says Nathiram, who is one of nine Vikalp activists trying to persuade more centres like Mirza-



Trader at the rope market: dying business

pur Pole to set up Samitis: "The rope-makers have realised that they can fight the Corporation only if they stand together." Adds Ganesh Prasad: "Basically the fight has to be political."

"Life has become very difficult," says Sumer Chand. "We can earn more only by keeping cattle or selling dead wood that we find in the jungle. I have five children, and

the choice for me is whether to give them clothes or food—there is not enough money for both."

Unrelieved Destitution: The cycle of poverty is therefore perpetuated; since children are indispensable in rope-making, they are not sent to school, and an average literacy rate of 6.7 per cent contributes to keeping the rope-makers mired in exploitation. Although both the parliamentary constituencies in the region are represented by Lok Dal members, no pressure has been put on the Uttar Pradesh Government to relieve the rope-makers' plight.

At the Daoudpura market last fortnight the effects of the Corporation's workings were abundantly visible. Compared to average sales of 800 quintals at each market in pre-Corporation days, the total sold at Daoudpura was only 200 quintals, and prices had shot up to an average of Rs 14.50 per 5-kg bundle of rope against the previous average of Rs 11. Says Shriyans Kumar Jain, a trader at the market: "Before Partition, Saharanpur rope used to sell as far away as in Lahore. Now we face stiff competition from rope made in Orissa's Mayurbhanj district, and West Bengal's Midnapore district, which are cheaper than Saharanpur rope. But our rope is superior in quality, and so we sell despite high prices."

To add to the traders' woes, the Uttar Pradesh Government levies a sales tax of 8 per cent, whereas the West Bengal Government has abolished sales tax on rope, and the Orissa Government encourages commercial cultivation of *bhabhar* grass. Says Vikalp's Ashok Chowdhury: "The Forest Act provides that low-level forest produce can be sold directly at subsidised rates to producers, but the Corporation refuses to sell grass in retail to the rope-makers."

The tragedy is that rope-making is a fringe industry, and the Government does not bother about its importance. As the noose tightens around the rope-makers' necks, there is only desolation amongst the poorer villagers who can perceive no alternative future. Traditional rope cots are now being edged aside by nylon-and-aluminium folding cots. The world outside the Gaarh region is getting increasingly sophisticated, but the rope-makers' lives, filled every day with the tedious hand-crafting of their product, are pushed further into poverty and deprivation. In the end survival might overtake loyalty to a traditional skill, and as the rope-makers reach the ends of their tethers, they will desert the region for greener pastures. It is also true of our system that the death of rope-making in Saharanpur will not be mourned; only, it might cause a twinge of nostalgia when a good rope cot becomes a museum piece.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG