

Khushi Ka Ek Din

Celebrating the women of Kumaon

Lede: On 15 February 2020, 300 women from 7 villages in Uttarakhand took the day off - perhaps for the first time in years, and perhaps for the first time together as 'saas' and 'bahu'.



“I won every time I tried to knock down that pyramid of tumblers”, said Janki Devi, a tall statuesque ‘bahu’ of village Seem. “We have had so much practice throwing things at the monkeys who ravage our farms, that we all have perfect aim!”

Playing games, eating momos or watching a movie in a theatre. To most of us, this just sounds like a Sunday well-spent. But for many, many women in the Indian Himalayas, these are things they have only heard about, seen on TV or experienced vicariously through the men or children in their lives.

Walk across any Uttarakhand village, and you’ll see specks of colour among fields of green or yellow - women in colourful saris dotting the landscape, tilling, sowing, harvesting or engaging in one of the myriad activities needed to keep their families well-fed and their fields well-maintained.

“Whenever I see pahadi women here, even when I am driving about, I always see them doing some work, or carrying something on their heads. I never see them sitting about freely”, says Anjali Nabiyal, who heads Udhyam, an entrepreneurship program in the Kumaon Himalayas. “I know we can’t solve all their problems, but perhaps we could bring one day of happiness, of change for them. That was my motivation behind Khushi Ka Ek Din”.

Women are the backbone of both the family and the agricultural economy in the mountains

How hard must you work to look after a one-hectare farm in the Indian Himalayas?

According to a 1992 study by the FAO titled 'Most Farmers in India are Women', a pair of bulls would work 1064 hours, a man would work 1212 hours, while a woman would work 3485 hours a year on a farm that size. Almost three decades later, little has changed.

Recognising this, a group of organisations working in the Uttarakhand Himalayas decided to come together and do something special to celebrate these hard-working women.



Games, fast food, stand-up comedy and a portable movie theatre in the hills

A day for celebrating Kumaoni women

On 15th February 2020, Udhyam, Happy Children's Library and the Meteores Trust came together to organise a day full of fun, food, games and even a full-size cinematic movie theatre experience in a remote village called Byasi in Nainital district's Betalghat block.

300 women from 10 villages in Nainital district - Seem, Byasi, Darmani, Siltona, Bichhnai, Nauna, Garjauli, Satoli, Barhgal and Suyal - as well as a few from Almora and Bageshwar districts attended on the day, each being the recipient of a 'Golden Ticket' that allowed free access to the event as well as all the activities. Most importantly, the ticket kept all men and children out - so the women could focus just on themselves for a change!

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A few months prior to the event, the organising teams had conducted focus group discussions with a few groups of women.

According to Pankaj Wadhwa, founder of Udhyam, “People hadn’t travelled much, but we couldn’t create a travel experience for them. So the next thing was, what would you like to see? That’s when these elements emerged - watching a movie, playing games, eating fast food - the women wanted to do all the things that typically, only men do.”

Another interesting element that came out of those discussions was that the *saas* (mother-in-law) and *bahu* (daughter-in-law) wouldn’t be able to both come together - as someone had to stay back to look after the children and the house. To get past that, the organisers decided to add a bit of fun to the mix, promising something special for *saas-bahu* pairs who would attend together. “We asked them - why can’t you take one day off and get the man to stay home for one day? It worked - almost 50 people came together with their *saas* or *bahu*! Which means that 50 men were back home on that day, playing the role unquestionably reserved for the women of the house.”

First-time experiences marked the day for most women who attended the event

Based on all the inputs received from the focus groups, a 6-hour event was organised on a grassy field with the snow-clad Himalayan peaks of Trishul and Nanda Devi as a stately backdrop.

A world-class digital movie theatre was set up thanks to PictureTime, a mobile movie theatre company focused on rural areas. For many women, this was the first time they had ever seen a film on a large screen. In addition to the film itself, there was the digiplex, of course - a sight in itself. It was a large inflatable yellow tent fully equipped with a full-size screen, Dolby surround sound and even air-conditioning.

The screening of the dark comedy *Karwaan*, starring Irfaan Khan, Dilqar Salman and Mithila Palkar, was a big hit amongst the younger women, who enjoyed the irreverent movie. It was such a new experience, that inside the shrouded darkness of the air-conditioned tent, some of the older women continued to talk in hushed whispers about the experience of sitting there watching a movie - not quite sure how to feel about it!

The day marked a number of other firsts - the first time someone had their eyebrows threaded (and learnt about the pain of looking pretty!), the first time someone tried *momos* and the first time they played games they had only seen their children play so far.

Simple games like *hoopla*, knocking over tumblers and wearing a blindfold and putting a *bindi* on a lifesize poster of a woman were a huge hit! In the words of Janki Devi from village Seem, “I won every time I tried to knock down that pyramid of tumblers. We have had so much practice throwing things at the monkeys who ravage our farms, that we all have perfect aim!” Others spoke about how they found the games a learning experience, as throwing coins into a bucket of water made them understand motion underwater.



For a lot of women, playing games was something they had only seen their children experience so far

“Television has brought a lot of these ideas into our lives, but to experience it in person was a whole new experience”, said Deepa Devi, a 35-year old homemaker from Village Siltona.

Another hit amongst the bahus in particular was Pawan Pahaadi, a dashing young standup comic known for his sets in Kumaoni. Not only did he regale the crowd with jokes and songs, but he compèred the highlight of the afternoon - a game for 15 lucky saas-bahu pairs which tested out how well they knew each other, with cheeky questions curated by Jaya Shah, founder of Happy Children’s Library. The game was one of the most popular events of the day, with the women appreciating the chance for saas and bahu to come together on stage as a team.



The ‘blindfolded bindi’ game was one of the biggest hits

Other firsts were noticed by the organisers of the event. According to Jaya, who works with the children of many of the attending women through her community library, “In these villages, discrimination because of caste is still a big issue. But today, it felt like everyone who came here

was equal. Women of all different backgrounds and castes were sitting together, eating together. That's what made me happy - to see that we can all come together and forget about these things, and just have a good time!"

Giving mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law time to bond without the burden of work

For older women, especially, it was the dawn of a different day. According to one of the oldest participants at the event, "Today, the sun has risen from another side of the mountain. With my bad knees, I can no longer walk to nearby villages when local festivals and melas happen. This movie theatre and the rest of the activities have shown me something I have never experienced before."

Even as this lively group of women were chatting, singing and dancing, the sight of other pahadi women in the distance, carrying impossibly large bales of hay on their heads could not go unnoticed, observed Jasmeet Singh of IABT Foundation, who had volunteered for the event. Even though the day marked something special - numerous men had taken the day off to tend to the house and kids, so that their wives or mothers could attend - one couldn't forget that they would go back to a household waiting for them to take back the mantle of these chores.



Each attendee had a 'Golden Ticket' to allow them entry and more importantly - keep the men out!

Yet, there is a silver lining of sorts. While dwindling agriculture because of climate change and the menace of wild animals is a challenge, it does mean that the burden on women is slowly lifting, albeit for the wrong reasons. Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law now spend more time chatting and joking instead of being engaged in housework day and night. And even though events like this are only for one day at a time, they do lead to conversations that challenge the norm.

According to one woman who attended the event, her husband was afraid that this fun-filled gathering would also be a place for women to discuss what to do about their alcoholic husbands. Of course, the day was spent laughing, dancing and enjoying - but this hints to a recognition of the skewed gender norms still prevalent in the region.

"Today, we have shown it is possible for a saas and bahu to come out together. We have shown our children, too, that another world is possible."

In the words of 60-year old Bhagwati Devi, whose family had even taken a financial hit to ensure her son stayed back home so she could attend the event with her daughter-in-law, "Today, we have shown it is possible for a saas and bahu to come out together. We have shown our children, too, that another world is possible."