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Lata Revisited

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This small settlement in Uttarakhand, where the Chipko movement was born, deserves a chapter of its own in any history of India. ASHISH KOTHARI and NEEMA PATHAK return to track its ups and downs — a story with a message for our environmental future.



Photo: Ashish Kothari

As we took the well-travelled, winding road from Rishikesh to Joshimath, we were overwhelmed by conflicting emotions. At once mere humans dwarfed and humbled by the enormity and seeming invincibility of the mountains, we were also witness to the damage humans are capable of doing to them. This emotional churning reached its zenith as we visited Lata, a small settlement that deserves a chapter of its own in any history of India. Both for being the birthplace of one of the world's most inspiring movements, and for displaying the startling ups and downs that characterise the people, the rivers, and the forests of this region.

Lata, in the Niti Valley of Uttarakhand with the Nandadevi peak to its east, is one of the Bhotia tribal villages credited with initiating the Chipko movement. As Dhan Singh Rana, Sarpanch of Lata (who was a small boy then) and Bali Devi (who actively participated) related to us, “in 1974, the women of Reni village stopped a contractor's men from felling Deodar (Cedar) trees above the village, at a time when their men folk were away. We (mostly women and children) joined them in this struggle”. This small but effective action caught the imagination of many more communities and activists, and became powerful enough to move government policy. Several movements in the rest of India (e.g. Apikko in Karnataka), and many other countries, have since then gained inspiration from the women of Reni and Lata.

Ironic outcome

Ironically, though, these villages were to subsequently bear the brunt of the policies that were partly an outcome of their own movement. The state government banned commercial felling in the Himalayan stretches, and the centre promulgated the Forest Conservation Act (FCA) 1980. While their objectives were to stop indiscriminate deforestation, they also dealt a heavy blow to the village economy. Wood required to meet household and agricultural needs was hard to come by, including from forests the villagers had helped protect! Proposals for small-scale developments like pipelines on forest land remained pending for long periods. This was a serious distortion of the intent of Chipko's earliest activists, to ensure local control and benefits from the use and conservation of forests. So strong was the resentment against these restrictive policies that in 1988-89, several Chipko activists and other villagers, launched a *ped kato andolan* (movement to cut trees)! This *andolan* also overlapped substantially with the demand for separate statehood for the hill regions of Uttar Pradesh.

Drastic changes

Lata and several other villages had earlier been successful traders, taking advantage of their strategic location on the great trade route into Tibet. After the 1962 Indo-China war, trade completely stopped. As Dhansingh Rana told us, “we were once proud traders, now we have been reduced to marginal farmers begging for livelihoods”. The restrictive forest policies in this context were like the proverbial salt on wounds.

To make matters worse, the state government, in 1982, notified 630 sq km around Nandadevi as a national park. This was done without any consultations with local people. A recommendation by the then Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh, to do a social impact assessment before notifying the national park, was ignored. So was the local people's connection with the area as a sacred, cultural landscape and their dependence on it for livelihoods. Lata, Reni and other villages lost their access to higher altitude pastures for grazing, as also the income they derived as guides and porters for

expeditions to Nandadevi peak. Promises by the government for alternative grazing grounds and jobs were never fulfilled.

At a meeting we had with Lata's residents, it became evident that even 30 years later, the national park remains a highly emotive issue. Their anger had boiled over in 1998 when Lata launched the *jhapto-chheeno andolan* (snatch-&-grab movement). Several hundred people from the villages of Niti Valley forcibly entered the national park in a symbolic move to assert their right of access; in the face of their resolve, the state government had to withdraw armed police it had earlier deployed.

Emotional issue

In 1988, a much larger area of 6,407 sq km, with the national park as its core, was declared a Biosphere Reserve, and in 1992 a part of it as a World Heritage Site. For the villagers of Lata, however, these designations appear to have meant little. And its irony-filled history did not end here. In the last few years, the valley has been reverberating with the blast of explosives being used for a series of hydro-electricity projects. Many of these sites, like ugly wounds in the mountainside, were responsible for our conflicting emotions travelling up from Joshimath. Over 20 small and large dams are proposed in Niti valley alone, some of them within the biosphere reserve. Civil society representations regarding the ecological and social costs of these projects have mostly fallen on deaf ears, with only a couple of projects in the uppermost reaches of the Ganga basin having been cancelled. One of our most ironical sights was of Reni village; from across the river, we could see the village and the forests it saved perched high on the hillside, and directly below, enormous gashes above the Rishi Ganga river where a powerhouse is coming up. Lata village, however, has managed to stall a project below it on the Dhoulai Ganga for several years.

Lata has also led the way to sustainable tourism in the area. In 2001, villagers protested the government's permission to the Indian Mountaineering Federation to conduct expeditions into the national park (given that villagers were banned from entering it). At a workshop jointly organised with an NGO forum, Alliance for Development, they issued the "Nanda Devi Biodiversity Conservation and Ecotourism Declaration", which asserted their rights to control and benefit from tourism and other economic activities in the area, and their resolve to protect its biodiversity (<http://mountainshepherds.com/research/nanda-devi-declaration/>). Under pressure, the government opened up a few trekking routes on the fringes of the park for management by the local people. Though this initiative is still too small to provide benefits to anything more than a minority of people, its potential is shown in the activities of Mountain Shepherds, a Lata-based company run mostly by local youth, who have been trained in various aspects of mountaineering, and now manage over a dozen treks a year (www.mountainshepherds.com). The forest department too has pitched in to help develop home-stays in a couple of villages.

The department has recently accessed funds from UNESCO, and compensatory funds from the hydro-electricity projects, to provide eco-development benefits to villagers. At a consultation organised by the Wildlife Institute of India and Kalpavriksh in April 2011, residents of Lata, Reni, Paing and Tolma complained that since they were the ones to primarily lose livelihoods due to the national park, these funds should be prioritised for them. Department officials have promised to consider this in the plan of operations for the following year. They have also agreed to a regular forum of dialogue with villagers.

Deja vu?

The women of Lata wondered, however, if these new promises will go the way of earlier ones. They spoke appreciatively of some previous forest officers with whom they had drawn up programmes for comprehensive village development and conservation. Most of these did not materialise, because they were not internalised in the system. Villagers are equally disillusioned by other government departments in the area. They were therefore excited to hear of the potential of the Forest Rights Act, which could possibly give them control over their customarily used forest area, maybe even provide them with tools to continue their struggle against inappropriate hydro-power development.

There is indeed a potential to resolve conflicts and move towards both conservation and livelihood security at a landscape level. The presence of community-managed *van panchayat* forests, the knowledge and willingness of the local people, a positive attitude amongst forest officials, the status of a Biosphere Reserve and a World Heritage Site, and availability of legal spaces such as the Forest Rights Act, are elements of this potential. What is needed is an institutional structure that brings together the local people, forest and other government officials, NGOs and outside experts, to use these opportunities. But if decision-making remains centred in the bureaucracies of Dehradun and Delhi, Lata's ironical ups and downs, mirroring those of thousands of other Indian villages, will continue to torment its residents.

The authors are members
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