

**Colonised by Brethren:  
People and Natural Resource Management in Uttarakhand**

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*The beautiful shrine of Tungnath (3680m) in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand, attracts many visitors. Few visitors realize that the lush forests and the alpine pastures surrounding this shrine, are under the management and control of a village level institution in the valley called the Makku Van Panchayat (VP). Established in 1958, the Makku VP manages an area of over 2000 ha. The villagers follow strict rules and regulations for extraction of forest resources. In addition to the VP, women through their Mahila Mangal Dal (MMD) are also protecting and using civil forests (outside of the VP) based on consensus decision-making.*

*Not very far from the famous Pindari Glacier and en route to the Namik Glacier, among the high rocky mountains, surrounded by several hundred hectares of temperate forests and high altitude pastures or bhugials lies the village Shama in Bageshwar district. In an area of nearly 1500 ha, the village manages a complex system of bhugials, forests, and water sources. The management of these forests is largely the responsibility of the Van Panchayat established in 1954. However, the entire village actively participates in formulation and implementation of rules and regulations. "If you could walk with us we would show you how women have de-silted the fresh water lakes on top of the mountain and how we have protected our forests" says a very proud 30-year old Nandi Korunga, who returned to the village after completing her post-graduation from Bageshwar and is currently the Gram Pradhan (head of village panchayat).*

The above are examples of community-based systems of natural resource management in Uttarakhand. Other such systems and institutions in the region include, the traditional *Lath Panchayats* (protection of forests by rotation), *Yuvak Dals* (Youth Groups), *Mahila Mangal Dals* (Women's Groups), *Dekh Rekh Samitis* (Groups for village maintenance and upkeep and sometimes forest management). This area also has a remarkable history of social and environmental movements including that of the famous *Chipko* Movement. People's movements against mining such as the one at Shama village in Kumaon, the *Beej Bachao Andolan* (Save the Seeds Campaign)

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and the valiant effort of the villagers of Jardhargaon to conserve their forests, are just a few examples.

### **The Question of Survival**

What do these proactive and constantly evolving systems and people's movements tell us? That people in Uttaranchal are highly environment conscious?

We would say yes, but not many in Uttaranchal would agree. According to Shri Nand Singh Maithani, ex-Sarpanch Makku VP, Shri Dhum Singh Negi, Sarpanch, Lata VP (Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve), Supi Devi Bisht and Mangsiri Devi Rana of the same village, *Chipko* and other people's struggles in Uttaranchal have been extremely misunderstood. Essentially, these movements were an effort to assert local control and access over natural resources. "Environment is not an 'issue' for us, it's a question of survival. If we don't look after our immediate environment, we would perish" says Maithani "but we can't protect either ourselves or the environment if we have no voice in the development and conservation processes". He feels while the world has seemingly become more "environmentally conscious", local demands for access to and control over natural resources have been completely overlooked. In effect, in their opinion, an increased awareness about the Himalayan environment, created because of people's movements, is being used as a tool to deprive people from access to their own resources. It was because of this that a lesser-known movement called "*Cheeno Jhapto Andolan*" was started in mid eighties and early nineties. This movement, which literally meant "Snatch and Grab" was based on forcefully taking control over resources. As a result, the destructive forestry operations by Forest Development Corporation in Makku were stopped and people around Nanda Devi National Park were able to get access to some basic resources within the Park.

### ***Van Panchayats in Uttaranchal***

What unfortunately the post-independence era has seen is a gradual subjugation of people's institutions and custodianship of natural resources. This can be best understood by tracing the history and current status of VPs in the state. *Van Panchayats* (Forest Management Councils) are amongst the few community institutions in the country that enjoy official recognition and legal support, in this case, under the Indian Forest Act, 1927 (IFA).

VPs are the result of a strong people's movement against forest policies of the British. In the pre-British era people living in and around the forests enjoyed

unlimited and unrestricted rights to use forest resources. The colonial regime undertook the first land revenue settlement in 1823. Between 1911-1917 as a result of another series of land settlements, new rules and regulations on forest use were imposed on the people. This led to many agitations. A Forest Grievances Committee for Kumaon region was set up in 1921 to look at how best to resolve these conflicts. The Committee's recommendations resulted in returning commercially less valuable forests to the villagers for use and management. A provision was made for creation of *Van Panchayats* in 1931.

Over 13% of the total forest land in Uttaranchal is presently under VPs. VPs operate under the jurisdiction of the District Magistrate (DM), at the district level and the Sub-Divisional Magistrate at the sub-division or *Tehsil* level. Elections for VP members and a *sarpanch* take place every five years. VP forests are used for grazing livestock, cutting fodder, collecting dried and fallen leaves, fuel wood, and poles and timber for house construction. The availability of these products depends upon the size and type of forest. Each VP makes its rules and regulations according to the demand for and supply of forest products and these differ from one VP to another. The Forest Department is expected to be a technical advisor.

### **Threats to *Van Panchayats***

It is interesting to note that the British recognized the ability of hill people to manage their resources and kept VPs out of the Indian Forest Act of 1927 possibly to facilitate their independent functioning. However, three amendments made after independence have reduced the powers of the VP. VPs are now under the IFA and can only be carved out of Civil Forests as against Class I Reserved Forests earlier. In addition, the Uttaranchal Forest Department, since 1997, has been promoting Village Forest Joint Management (VFJM) in the VPs. This move unfortunately attempts to bring VPs within the purview of the Forest Department. The UP VFJM Rules of 1997 enable the Forest Department to become a dominant partner in the management of VP and Civil Forest lands.

This has attracted widespread opposition from the VPs across the state. VPs have so far had a fair amount of independence in day to day management, formulation and implementation of rules and regulations and so on. However, the revised Uttaranchal VP Rules 2001 concentrate heavy powers in the post of Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) subjugating the VP. According to Madhu Sarin, who has studied the impacts of this World Bank sponsored VFJM Scheme on the VPs, VFJM in Uttaranchal appear to be the

latest tool by the Forest Department to gain entry over lands which were so far not under their control and co-opt institutions which have worked well without their interference so far. It is also unfortunate that mostly well-functioning VPs are planned to be brought under this scheme, thus taking power away from those who have worked well. Madhu Sarin's study shows a number of examples where VPs functioning well for decades have broken down after the imposition of VFJM.

### **Problems Faced by *Van Panchayats***

The arguments in support of VPs are no way an attempt to romanticise institutions like VPs. Many VPs in Uttaranchal are ridden with a host of internal and external problems. There are VPs that are extremely degraded and some others exist only on paper. In terms of governance, the *sarpanch* being the main arbitrator of VPs, a large amount of power is vested in this one post. Depending upon the individual *sarpanchs* the functioning of the VP ranges from highly participatory and transparent to ridden with party politics and dominated by powerful sections of the society. Participation of women in most VPs is very poor; in fact in many villages women have taken charge of non-VP forests and are protecting and using them sustainably through *Mahila Mangal Dals*.

In many areas the VPs are unable to restrict forest degradation. According to Shri Maithani "VPs are facing the typical problems of a representative governance. A *sarpanch* today is not the social worker that he used to be in the past, this post now has financial and political aspirations. *Sarpanchs* often do not call regular meetings as meetings means disclosure of accounts and other activities". According to Maithani and others the *gram sabha* (village assembly, including all adult members of the village/hamlet) needs to be the basic unit of decision-making in a village. The *gram panchayat*, VP, *Mahila Mangal Dals*, etc. selected after transparent community deliberations then become directly answerable and responsible to the *gram sabha*.

There is also displeasure over the distribution of funds derived from the VP. Many *sarpanchs* feel that the 40% of the revenue claimed by the Forest Department is not justified since by and large, the Forest Department makes little or no contribution towards the management of these forests. People also question the extent to which VPs can really be considered 'people's institutions'. The ultimate power still lies in the hands on the DM or the SDM.

The need of the hour then is to understand the shortfalls of the VPs and strengthen them with suggestions coming from the people. In the year 2002, VP members have formed a state-level network to oppose imposition of VFJM on VPs and other threats faced by VPs in the state. One of the mandates of the network is to look at the internal problems of VPs and work towards making it a more democratic and transparent institution. The network has already submitted an alternative to the 2001 Uttaranchal VP Rules.

### **The Way Ahead**

If by adopting policies like VFJM, the Government of Uttaranchal intends to achieve devolution of power and better management of forests in the state, then it needs to revisit its approach. It needs to understand why and where people's movements are stemming from. The circumstances under which people's institutions originate and progress. Constraints they face. And how best they can be strengthened? Answers do not lie in imposition of new and top down policies but in facilitating a dialogue, in generating a consensus. In strengthening and supporting local systems of resource management, wherever they exist. If not, then people of Uttaranchal who were appreciated and rewarded by the colonial government will remain colonized by brethren in independent India.

*“When the British took our forests away we were angry, but we could understand, they were colonizers after all. After independence whatever was left with us was slowly taken away, we thought how would a plains person know what forests mean to a hill woman...we fought...lost our beloved ones but gained a separate state. Now when we have our own people in the governance... who have lived and seen the hardships like us and yet forest policies take a step back...we don't understand... we can't understand...,”*  
an unknown VP member during a state level meeting on revised Uttaranchal VP rules 2001.

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