

The struggle for community based conservation and equitable tourism in the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve in india

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Mountain communities are amongst those marginalized groups whose destinies are mostly decided by an influential tribe of resourceful institutions/persons who often represent diverse interest groups. Be it in the name of conservation or tourism, we always find ourselves the last party to decide our own destinies. Perhaps it is because we live in a land of abundant resources and opportunities. Perhaps, it is because of our looking at the mountains from an all-together different perspective. Or it may be due to our isolation or poverty or a myriad of other esoteric reasons. However, in the chaos and confusion of new terminologies whereby we have been reduced to mere beneficiaries or stakeholders, we would like to reassert our stand as owners of our lands. This paper comes straight from the leadership of the Bhotia tribal community of the Niti Valley. The issues raised in this presentation belong to the Bhotia community. The main author of this presentation is a member of the local leadership. The other authors belong to an advocacy group and are also Paharies. In this paper we would like to share our struggles and the blue print of the destiny we have decided for ourselves and our children.

Our area and history: We live in the Niti Valley comprising the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve in the District of Chamoli, Uttaranchal, India. We had a flourishing trade with Tibet but the Indo-China conflict of 1962 put an end to this. With the closure of the trade we also lost the rights over our traditional camping grounds right from Niti down to the lower Terai areas. It was the collective efforts of our community which culminated in the Chipko Movement of the 1970--80s. The veteran Gaura Devi who led the women contingent of the movement to stop the felling of trees by hugging them, belonged to our tribe.

With the closure of the Tibet trade our people found a source of livelihood in mountaineering activities around Nanda Devi. Here we would like to emphasize that Nanda Devi is not mere a

S. No.	Name of the Peak	Height
1	Dunagiri	7066 Mt.
2	Changbang	6864 Mt.
3	Kalnka	6931 Mt.

peak, but a sacred summit for the entire Garhwal and Kumaon region. Nanda Devi is a Goddess. For us she is the daughter of the Himalaya and the wife of Shiva. The Goddess in her sanctuary remains aloof and unapproachable. The inner area is like a bowl with only one access route from the village of Lata. The rim of this magical bowl is studded with a number of peaks making our area one of the richest in terms of biodiversity. Some of the peaks are presented in the adjoining table. In 1982, our area was notified as a National Park vide Uttar Pradesh Government Order No 3912/ 14-3 /35 / 80 dated 6th Sept 1982. We were never consulted on this important decision which was to change our lives and affect our livelihood. Though returns from mountaineering were significant it was not the case of the ban on mountaineering alone. We lost our right to access the areas, which were our traditional grazing lands and our summer dwellings (Chanees). Our traditional health care system collapsed with the unavailability of herbs and our food supplies and the space was quickly filled by the market oriented allopathic system. Though the restrictions came with a set of compensatory promises none were fulfilled. In fact the various schemes initiated in the name of rehabilitation promoted corruption and fragmentation of the society. This started a process of alienation which created a feeling of

4	Rishi Pahar	6992 Mt.
5	Mangraon	6765 Mt.
6	Nanda Khat	6631 Mt.
7	Maiktoli	6803 Mt.
8	Mrigthuni	6655 Mt.
9	Trishul -1	7120 Mt.
10	Trishul-II	6319 Mt.
11	Bethartoli Himal	6352 Mt.
12	Nanda Devi East	7434 Mt.
13	Nanda Devi Main	7817 Mt.
14	Devisthan -1	6529 Mt.
15	Devisthan -II	6678 Mt.
16	Hanuman	6070 Mt.

Table 1: Important Peaks surrounding the NDNP

aversion towards traditional subsistence activities, especially amongst our young people. What we are witnessing today is all-pervading unemployment and a colossal loss of traditional skills and knowledge.

Right from the notification of the park, we have been struggling for the restoration of our traditional rights. There were periods of intense agitation and periods of silence when we believed in the promises of the authorities. We too have learned our collective lessons during this two-decade-old struggle. Recently we have been involved in networking with other communities and have been regularly interacting with advocacy groups. This exposure has helped us in formulating our strategies and in raising our hopes that there is still a chance to avoid tailor-made destinies. With the formation of our separate mountain state of Uttarakhand, our struggle has entered a decisive phase. This phase is full of opportunities as well as threats. A detailed account on this phase is available at this link

(See <http://www.mtnforum.org/resources/library/gslat02a.htm>)

Nevertheless we have been able to concretize our aspirations in the form of a declaration.

(See <http://www.mtnforum.org/resources/library/gslat01a.htm>)

As we are presently involved in the decisive phase of our struggle, we would like to share some of the critical issues with you and need your creative feedback to consolidate our position.

1. **Landscape as CPR:** We understand that the 'product' in mountain tourism is the landscape of our area. This is basically the combined impact of natural resources and our unique geographical location in the mountains. Since our struggle is for the right over natural resources and in certain areas we, as communities do own the forests in the form of Van Panchayats or village commons, it is obvious that this landscape is a common property resource. It really hurts us that we, the legitimate owners of the main tourism product in mountains are never consulted and are merely seen as beneficiaries in the guise of porters. The role we would like to have is that of owner. There may be issues related to equity or carrying capacity which we can always handle on the basis of the Nanda Devi Declaration, this can be dealt with by hiring consultants on carrying capacity/ conservation issues provided we first consolidate our position as owners of the tourism industry in our area. But this will only remain wishful thinking until we unite and can make our case presentable.
2. **Impact of the restrictions on the livelihood of local communities:** There were severe economic and socio cultural implications of the

restrictions imposed on us. As we are the victims of this unjustified restriction, we do have a right to question and initiate legal action against those who are responsible for our disaster. Presently we are in the process of quantifying our damage as per our own criteria and need legal support. To start with every household in Lata is calculating the impact of the restrictions according to a commonly agreed format.

3. **Capacity building:** With the support from 'Alliance for Development' we are exploring opportunities for the capacity building of our youth in various areas. The most important department is training in adventure and eco tourism along with e-marketing and communication skills. By consolidating our position we can certainly change the vicious cycle of the education induced migration of our children. Since there aren't any employment opportunities for our educated youth, the only option they are left with forces them to go in the plains in search of jobs. Thus the community as a collective never gets the benefit of education. The opportunities for educated youth at the grassroots level will eventually help in our taking over the scientific management and conservation of the bio diversity of our area. Thus the argument by the decision-makers that we are not scientifically competent to manage our resources will become null and void. As a matter of fact the first phase of the training of local youth incorporates these issues. However, our children do need special training packages for the appreciation and monitoring of bio diversity. Here we would like to emphasize that we aren't looking at tourism as the only route to our salvation. There could be other support services/activities, which may contribute in evolving a diverse economic package for our children. There will be a positive resultant impact of arresting the rate of migration of our educated youth. The synergies will not only manifest in local governance and the rooting out of corruption but will initiate a socio-cultural renaissance in our society. There may be apprehensions about the consequences of population pressure in a fragile area like ours, but eventually our educated generations would also like to venture in other areas. There is one more important issue in the debate of ownership in tourism business. This is concerning our self image which gets distorted in the present setup of looking at the local population only as porters. The question is why should we subscribe to a development model which reduces a poor but proud member of our community into a porter. Aren't there any other options/opportunities for us?

There is a prominent thought, which aims at manipulating our lifestyles so as to reduce the pressure on the natural resources. Some of the subtle objectives of such interventions are nothing but evil designs aimed at initiating processes leading to our migration from these natural paradises. We wonder if this cannot be termed as a case of ethnic cleansing. Approaches like these must be condemned by the civil society. Our efforts for the capacity building of our

youth aim at strengthening our position as the guardians of the bio-diversity of our area. The tentative steps of our immediate plans are as under:

- I. **Evolving and strengthening a community based institutional mechanism for bio diversity conservation and equitable tourism in the buffer zone of NDBR:** The idea is to evolve a community based institution involving all stakeholders in the villages of the buffer zone. Government and resource agencies will also be involved in the proposed institution.
- II. **Capacity building:** Tourism will open a wide range of income generating activities for our children however these opportunities will come with the inherent baggage of responsibilities ranging from conservation to assuring quality services to the tourists. As a first step towards capacity building we have discussed a training package of 35 days with the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering at Uttarkashi. Apart from basic mountaineering, the proposed training would involve mountain manners, first aid, catering and orientation on the importance of the bio-cultural diversity of the region. In the second phase we intend to strengthen the communication skills of our youth and develop in them a definite mastery over the Internet and e marketing. Later on we envisage the utilization of a part of the trained manpower in the propagation of skills to other eligible youth culminating in an institutional process for continuous up gradation and simultaneous extension at the saturation level. The new equitable economic order will not only ensure peace in our otherwise sensitive area but will help in creating conditions conducive for the conservation of the rich bio cultural diversity of our region.
- III. **Based on the carrying capacity of the region, design an integrated eco-tourism plan for the buffer zone of NDBR:** Equations, an organization working on tourism issues (www.equitabletourism.org) has extended support to help us in the designing of a carrying capacity based model. Presently, we do have certain plans and so far we have designed a few dummy packages to illustrate the kind of tourism activities we would like to initiate in our area. Some of these are presented at the end of this paper.

Convergence: The formation of a new mountain state was a major milestone in our struggle for environmental justice. Now, the concerned authorities are approachable and the present Director and Deputy Director of the park are sympathetic to our demands. However there is still a reluctance to acknowledge and align with the Panchayati Raj institutions and to hand over the power invested in them vide the 73rd constitutional amendment. The situation is similar in the other Protected Areas. The future of mountain communities the world over depends on how they assert their rights and take a proactive stand in the conservation of the biodiversity of their area. The policy planners too have to understand that empowering the local communities is the

only way to ensure sustainability in the region. However this will remain a distant dream until we explore ways to establish linkages between various mountain communities and evolve a common platform. This we have learned from our struggle - that collectivism and a convergence of efforts is the key for survival and this is the invitation we would like to extend to all of you.

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Notes to readers

The paper is a case study on The struggle for community based conservation and equitable tourism in the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve in India. A paper presented to The Namche Conference People, Parks and Mountain Ecotourism. 24-26 May 2003.

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