



# Community Rights and Livelihoods in the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, India



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# **Community Rights and Livelihoods in the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve**

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The affiliation and professional positions of the authors were those current at the time the study was conducted.

# **preface**

Conflicts over natural resources in the western Himalayas of India are not a recent phenomenon. While earlier conflicts often resulted from contention over natural resources, for example when the state in its bid to exploit timber was resisted by communities as illustrated by the Chipko movement, a more recent source of conflict is linked ironically with the laudable motive of conservation. What remains common is the continuing challenge of maintaining sources of livelihood for local communities while preserving the environment.

This publication describes the problems faced by and reactions of the communities of the Niti Valley in the Nanda Devi protected area, as an example of this type of conservation-related conflict. The aim is to provide a basis for discussion and to understand better the impacts of and reactions to conservation activities. The publication was developed from one of a series of case studies prepared under the 'Participatory Action Research Programme on Equity and Policy in the Management of Common Property Resources in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region' project which was funded by the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC).

The Niti Valley came into international limelight as a result of the Chipko movement – when local communities resisted organised timber felling by the state – and became an exemplary story of a local initiative for conservation. Paradoxically, when the Nanda Devi area was notified as protected in 1982 to support conservation, these same communities lost much of their usage rights in their traditional commons. The price of conservation was mainly borne by the local communities, the same people who had raised awareness of the need for conservation, and this was mainly because of their inability to have their voices heard and valued in the proper quarters and to negotiate an equitable deal. Recent developments indicate a promising increase in awareness of the needs and role of the 'local guardians' of these natural resources, and the development of activities to redress the issues.

ICIMOD recognises equitable management of common property resources as a key in working towards sustainable development. Especially in mountain areas, where local communities depend intrinsically on natural resources, loss of usage rights can have dire consequences for a community and lead to structural changes in the traditional livelihood systems. It can also be self-defeating, as community management systems designed to ensure sustainable rather than destructive use of natural resources are destroyed, and uncontrolled 'illegal' use – as a matter of survival – becomes the norm. ICIMOD believes that a continuing dialogue amongst stakeholders is needed to address issues of equity and poverty for sustaining and conserving the natural resources of the Himalayan region. We hope that this publication will contribute to this dialogue.

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# acknowledgements

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We also gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), which has allowed us to look into the impact of conservation and its restrictions on the communities around the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve and the communities' instinctive reactions to defend their own right to survival.

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Finally, we would like to acknowledge the full support and cooperation of the local people in the communities of the Niti Valley, without which this study would not have been completed. Their case is a case in point of the practical realities and effects of conservation on people, communities, and livelihoods, and the need to rethink some conservation actions and provide mitigating measures to address the social and economic dislocation they bring on marginal mountain communities. This publication is a tribute to their heroism and dedication and a statement of support for mitigating the effects of conservation.

The Authors

# executive summary

This discussion paper is about a unique physical and cultural landscape nestled in the northern part of the western Himalayas. The paper attempts to present the inside story of the people who inhabit this area and the complex web of issues they are entangled in. Their struggle is decades old and so are their vows. They are the people who live in the buffer zone of the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve (NDBR), located in the State of Uttaranchal in India.

As in many other protected areas, this region has witnessed severe and prolonged protests by the local community. Recently the protests in the NDBR have attracted wide attention. A number of national and international agencies have been observing keenly the recent sequence of events in the region. This Talking Points volume is being presented at a crucial phase in this struggle. The recently formed State of Uttaranchal has issued an order for the partial opening of the core zone of Nanda Devi for regulated tourism activities along the lines of community-based tourism. Though the demand charter of the local community is comprehensive, the opening of the core zone has changed the entire scenario. Now for the first time there are concrete opportunities for the local community to rejuvenate its economy. However, there are several strings attached to this package of opportunities. Skills, responsibilities, sustainability, management, and equity are some of the keywords that the community has to now understand and learn to deal with. This will be more challenging than the struggle itself.

This report is based on fieldwork and a review of the relevant literature. It discusses the history of the local community and browses through some of the salient features of the area, and focuses on the crux of the problem and the ways to resolve it. This analysis, it is hoped, will facilitate the campaign for the sustainable development of the region and may help in the promulgation of similar campaigns elsewhere.

# acronyms and abbreviations

CPR	common property resource
IMF	Indian Mountaineering Foundation
IRs	Indian rupee
masl	metres above sea level
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
NDBR	Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve
NDNP	Nanda Devi National Park
NTFP	non-timber forest product



# glossary

<b>baisakhi</b>	the harvest season, observed on the 13th of April each year
<b>bari system</b>	rotational duty of a family to take the lead on collective issues. The patterns of operation vary from village to village, and villages improvise on details according to their needs or the requirements of existing conditions
<b>basant panchami</b>	fifth day of spring in the lunar calendar
<b>Bhotiya</b>	a tribal community, mostly living in the highlands (Bhotiya communities are dominant in the Niti Valley)
<b>gram pradhan</b>	chairperson or head of the village common assembly
<b>gram sabha</b>	meeting of the elected village council
<b>guchhi</b>	mushroom ( <i>Morchella esculenta</i> ) belonging to the family <i>Helvellaceae</i>
<b>jhapto cheeno</b>	take by force
<b>kharif</b>	summer cropping season, usually during the rainy months from June to October
<b>rabi</b>	winter cropping season, usually during the dry season from November to May
<b>ringal</b>	thin cane used for making baskets, mats, and other household goods
<b>Katyuri</b>	Katyuri was the first historical dynasty during the 11th century AD; it ruled over unified Uttarakhand and left important records in the form of inscriptions and temples. In later periods, after the downfall of Katyuri, it is believed that Garhwal region was fragmented into more than 64 principalities.
<b>maanīs</b>	unit of weight equivalent to two pounds
<b>mahila mangal dals</b>	village women's groups
<b>Pandava</b>	protagonists of the Mahabharata's war – they are five virtuous brothers fighting the evil Kaurava in the war between good and evil

<b>pramukh</b>	headman
<b>scheduled caste</b>	caste at the bottom of the social hierarchy and regarded as untouchable; the Indian Constitution allows the President to draw up the list of groups that constitute the scheduled castes; the government maintains these lists to protect and promote the interests of the scheduled castes.
<b>Vanaadhikar</b>	'Forest Rights' – an NGO in Uttarakhand advocating for people's rights over forest commons
<b>van panchayat</b>	community-based forest management legalised by the Kumaon Van Panchayat Rule 1931 following grievances by communities over their loss of usufruct, their legal right to use and derive profit from the forest provided that the forest itself is not injured in any way.
<b>yuvak mangal dals</b>	village youth groups

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