

Land and People of the Niti Valley

Topography

The Niti Valley lies in the Joshimath subdivision of Chamoli district in the state of Uttaranchal (formerly Uttarakhand in the state of Uttar Pradesh), India, at an altitude of between 2,100 and 7,817 masl. The valley's major river is the Dhauliganga which flows south-southwest and has two main tributaries – the west-southwest flowing Rishiganga and the west flowing Girthiganga – with a confluence near the villages of Reni and Kailashpur. Upstream of Reni, the area is inhabited by a substantial tribal population, the Bhotiyas, with two main sub-tribes, the Marchha and Tolchha. The area falls within the buffer zone of the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve (NDBR). The core of the reserve is adjacent to the villages of Lata, Reni, Paing, and Tolma (see map opposite).

The entire valley falls in the Higher Great Himalayan physiographic domain. Near Lata, the river Dhauliganga meanders on a relatively flat plain; the stretch has good deposits of sand and gravel. Promising reserves of barite and copper have been traced about 16 km north-east of Malari near Barmatiya along the right bank of the Girthiganga. This mineralisation is also associated with lead, zinc, and antimony. There are several hot water sulphur springs in the valley near Bhavishyabadri, Tapovan, Saldhar, and Bhapkund.

The soils are of glacial and fluvio-glacial origin. The area remains under snow six months of the year, which influences the soil characteristics: rich in organic matter, but are only moderately productive because of the moderate depth of the soil column; the potassium content is relatively high. The soils are ideal for the cultivation of tuber crops like potatoes, as well as peas, legumes (rajmah), and staple cereal crops.

Villages

There are 24 villages in the Niti Valley upstream of Reni. With the exception of Bhalgaon, the villages are inhabited by members of the Bhotiya scheduled tribe. There are also a few scheduled caste families in some of the villages. In spite of its lost glory as a major trading centre, Malari village is still the largest summer settlement because of niche contractual and business opportunities available with security and development agencies. Most of the villages still carry out transhumance. While some of the winter villages are not far from the main villages and are located within the boundaries of the biosphere reserve, the villagers upstream of Juma migrate out of the reserve in the winter. This study was conducted with the communities that live throughout the year within the buffer zone of the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve.

Livelihoods

The centuries-old occupation of the Bhotiya community was trade with Tibet. Using pack goats as the means of transport they ferried goods from the plains to Tibet. The main occupation in the villages above Juma was trade, while the villages downstream assisted in trade. Villagers often worked as small businessmen or retailers. The villages above Juma (revenue area Malari) only grew summer crops, mostly cereals and pulses. In winter they migrated to lower areas. Villages downstream depended mainly on agriculture and animal husbandry, growing mainly cereals and pulses in summer, and wheat in winter. For many villages, sheep herding and woollen enterprises were the main occupation while the residents of Reni, Paing, and Jugju managed pack goats for the transportation of goods. The main exports were barley, jaggery (unrefined brown sugar made from palm sap), rice, and cloth. Imports included sheep, goats, salt, and wool. While trade continued, Malari village was a hub of activity. Some of the families from Malari settled in the lower altitude areas around Lata; they were welcomed while the resources were abundant, but the situation has changed considerably over the last decade. Similarly, the people of Bhalgaon, the only village of Gangadis (residents from the lower catchments), were invited to settle in the valley to perform religious ceremonies for the Bhotiyas. When the art of priesthood was gradually lost owing to the lack of patrons, these people also found themselves the victims of changed circumstances. Being non-tribals, they were not able to enjoy the benefits extended to the tribal communities.

With the closure of trade with Tibet after the Indo-China conflict of 1962, the Bhotiya community opted for other sources of livelihood. The pack goats were sold and the



One of 24 villages nestled in the Niti Valley

focus became sheep, woollen products, and agriculture. The growing popularity of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary as a mountaineering destination provided ample alternative employment opportunities for the villagers. This continued until 1982 when the area was notified as a national park with a complete ban on mountaineering and grazing in the core zone, which includes the Nanda Devi peak.

Cultural heritage and rituals of the Bhotiyas

The entire population in the Niti Valley is Hindu and the Hindu festivals are celebrated with great joy and ceremony. The main festivals are Basant Panchami, Baisakhi (Bikhoti), Nag Panchami (Fela Panchnag), Nanda Astami, and Dussehra (Durga Astami). The community has a strong belief in the importance of forefathers or ancestors ('pitra'). One important ritual is 'dharma', essentially welfare work conducted as a remembrance to departed souls. A primary form of dharma is the construction of resting places along the village route.

The main deity of devotion is the goddess Nanda Devi, with the Nanda Devi peak revered as a goddess by the entire Garhwal and Kumaon region. She is looked upon as Gaura, the wife of Lord Shiva, and is the chief patron of the local communities. The temple of Nanda Devi at Lata is the only major temple in the valley, believed to have been constructed during the Katyuri period. Folk tales suggest that the name Lata comes from Latu, the brother of Nanda Devi, and it is believed that the presence of the temple at Lata gives added blessings to the residents.

Table 1: Villages with winter migratory locations within the buffer zone of NDBR (Revenue area – Tapovan)

Village	Winter migration to
Reni	Same area
Murunda	Reni, Paing, Jua, Gwar
Paing	Same area
Lata	Lamtala, Bancheegaon, and Chiva
Jua Gwar	Same area
Jugju	Same area
Tolma	Gurmagwar, Suraithota
Bhalgaon	Same area; a few families go to Kurawa during 'Choumasa' (rainy season)
Suki	Talla Suki
Phagti	Pangrasu
Long	Markura (Sept.-Oct./March-April), Segari (Dec.-Feb.)

Table 2: Villages with winter migratory locations outside the NDBR (Revenue area – Malari)

Village	Winter migration to
Jumma	Kaleshwar
Kaga	Maithana
Garpak	Birhai, Pakhi
Dronagiri	Maithana, Pursari
Jelum	Nandprayag, Nengoli, Dedoli, Thirpak
Kosa	Tefna, Punkila
Malari	Dyuli, Balkhila
Kailashpur	Bajpur
Farkiya	Bejaar, Thirpak
Bampa	Chinka
Gamshali	Chinka
Niti	Bhimtala, Koudia

A special celebration, Lapsu or Lapsa, takes place at the beginning of the winter migration when the communities prepare to leave their dwellings in the higher areas. Idols, called 'murti', of village deities are taken in a procession from the village temple and settled in a house in the village. The headman and other senior members of the community host at least three *baris* or feasts for the entire village. The community bids adieu to the deity and vows to perform their rituals on their return to the land. The festival takes place at Malari, witnessed by the deity Dharma Danu (a 'pitra devta'), who makes a voyage from Jelum to Malari and back to Jelum. The ceremonial nature of the transhumance is more prominent among villagers who have migrated to the area. Other important festivals include the Pandava dance – a 15-day festival in August – and occasional performances of the hero of the land, Jitu Bagdwal. The village of Lata performs a ritualistic mask dance during the Baisakhi season, the period from mid-April to mid-May. Folklore, song, drama, and dance are an integral part of the festivals and lifestyle of the Bhotiya society, which are also marked by the consumption of traditional drinks (Purohit et al. 2002).



An all women festival dance

The indigenous management system

An indigenous system for the regulation and distribution of natural resources is still practiced in the Niti Valley. Embedded in the rituals of the goddess Nanda Devi, this system works through a socio-religious institution, ensuring participation of all stakeholders under an authority that everyone in the area respects. It works through the selection of a family made responsible for a fixed duration of time to call meetings on collective issues including distribution of resources. The term coined for this purpose is 'bari', meaning rotational duty of a family to take the lead on collective issues. The patterns of operation differ from village to village and villages

have further improvised on the system according to their needs and resource profile, but the institutional set-up and overall activities remain the same throughout the valley. The overall activities of the bari are:

- decisions related to religious ceremonies and collection of funds for these ceremonies;
- call for voluntary work such as construction of pathways and bridges, and cleanliness drives; and
- initiation and supervision of the distribution of hay collection areas for the winter.

In every village the selection of a family for the bari is done before the summer harvest during the occasion of Bhumyal Puja, a ceremony to offer prayers and offerings to Bhumyal Devta, the God of Earth. Harvesting starts after the Bhumyal Puja. The outgoing bari calls a meeting to select a new family to take on the responsibility. The selection is mostly done through a system of lottery among families who have not yet served their bari. Eligibility for participation is based on the payment of 'puja kar-dar' (tax for religious offerings) and involvement in the collective rituals dedicated to the goddess Nanda Devi and other gods.

There is a strong relationship between the location of villages and rights over the use of adjoining forests and rangelands. The settlement history of the villages and the rights of later immigrants also play an important role in defining their status. The sharing strategy in the bari system is village-specific. For example, in Paing the grazing areas have been categorised into accessible areas and areas forbidden to animals. The inaccessible areas are distributed equally among families for a period of five years for guarding or stewardship. The accessible areas are open for grazing. In Paing, the bari also calls for collective action in cases of suspicious activities observed as being carried out in their forests areas. Under such circumstances at least one person from each family is expected to join in the collective action, failing which a monetary punishment is meted on the family. It was through these collective actions that the villagers of Paing caught 14 armed poachers from Dharchula (Pithoragarh district) three decades ago. Again in 1992, collective village vigilance led to the spotting and arrest by the Forest Department of three poachers in the reserve forest. In 1999, village action helped to control a forest fire.

The collective nature of social work is also reflected on various occasions in the village of Paing. For example, during a marriage or any other major ceremony it is the duty of every family in the village to offer assistance in carrying supplies for the ceremony to the village. This also happens during the harvest season and in other matters of community interest.

In Pangrasu village, which was once a winter settlement and now functions as a permanent settlement because of close proximity to the road, grazing areas were traditionally distributed among families. Grazing is strictly prohibited in certain areas between May and November,



Chipko movement 30th anniversary logo

and allowed after hay has been harvested until March or April. During summer, the villagers of Pangrasu send their herds to the ‘bugyals’ (alpine meadows) of Long and Jelum where they have to pay grazing tax to the bari of the village. Families that have migrated but have paid the kar-dar tax are considered stakeholders, and one has to ask permission or buy rights for making hay in their allotted areas.

As in Pangrasu, some villagers from Long have settled in the winter settlements of Tamak and Segari. In Tamak, the hay-making areas are traditionally owned, but in the hamlet of Segari the areas are allotted every year. Prior to allocation, the hay-making areas are divided equally into the required number of shares and the allocation is done through lottery. The boundaries are redefined if the number of shareholders changes due to non-payment of kar-dar by some families, migration, or families having no animals. During the rainy season, most of the villages downstream send their animals to graze in the meadows of Long. At present, animals from Lata, Reni, Suki, and Bhalgaon use the meadows of Long for grazing during the rainy season. This is an opportunity for the village to charge grazing tax. The revenue earned goes to religious ceremonies devoted to the goddess Nanda Devi.

In the village of Lata, the bari system is more elaborate owing to the presence of the Nanda Devi temple and a long history of settlement and clan groupings. The village is settled along caste lines. There are four ‘mohallas’ or sectors belonging to the four castes in the village, with a clear division of responsibilities and stakeholder status in the bari system among castes. The names of the four mohallas reflect the original place or duty of the caste grouping. The first, Saina Patti, is the residence



The Nanda Devi temple in Lata village

of the Rawat caste. These were the 'malgujar' (rich and powerful families) of the village and presided over ritual ceremonies. The second is 'Paswa Patti' and belongs to the Butola caste – the custodians of the heritage of the goddess Nanda Devi. The third, 'Raifuria Patti', belongs to the Rana caste and bears the name of their original village. The Rana caste provides the pujari (priests) of the goddess. The areas of the scheduled caste lie some distance



Bhotiya woman and child

away from the main village. This caste also performs duties in the bari system. Previously a person was nominated from the scheduled caste families to act as 'paswan' or messenger of the goddess. His responsibilities included cleaning around the temple and announcing the various decisions of the village 'panch' (jury). He was entitled to two 'maanis' (about two pounds) of grain from each family every harvest season. The scheduled caste families are exempt from paying the kar-dar, but they are entitled to a share in the proceeds from the various village rituals. Under the strict caste system they are not allowed to enter the courtyard of the Nanda Devi temple.

One family from each of the upper caste mohallas is selected to function as bari. Thus, three families are routinely selected during the Bhumyal Pujan on a full moon ('purnima') day in May or June. The earlier practice was to select two panch from each of the three mohalla, decision making was done jointly and decisions were communicated and executed through the respective bari of the particular mohallas. The bari system is still functioning but the place of the panch has been replaced by collective decision making. The sphere of activities under the bari system is similar to that in other Bhotiya villages in the Niti Valley. In Lata, the areas for winter hay-making are allotted for three years. Plots of equal sizes are demarcated under two categories: accessible plots, and faraway plots, with each family getting two plots. However, there is subtle resentment among the 18 or 19 late settler families in Lata. Although they also pay the kar-dar and are included in the bari system, they have been allotted a separate area for distribution of grass. Families of the scheduled castes have also been provided with a separate area for 'ghas maang' (grass/fodder), and they also resent this because of the low productivity and quality of grass in the area. In fact, the entire summer settlement of the scheduled caste population in Lata is located on a landslide prone zone. In 1998, a severe landslide demolished a few houses and caused one death. Landholdings among this section of society are generally meagre and produce less compared to the landholdings of the upper castes.

The bari system is still the dominant institutional mode of management and conflict resolution in the villages of the Niti Valley. It ensures collective action on a wide range of issues. The seasonal construction of temporary bridges across the Dhauliganga to access hay-making areas, cleanliness drives, management of



Dorji

ceremonies, distribution of resources, and the rhythms of seasonal migration are all governed by ritualistic traditions and the built-in institution of the bari which manage them.

Trade with Tibet and transhumance were also based on sound community management strategies. Basant Panchami (spring) used to be the start of the community movement towards the summer villages. Basant Panchami is widely celebrated in Uttarakhand as the children's festival of 'Phuldei'. Children gather flowers from the forest early in the morning and lay them before every family's doorstep. After the spring festival of Phuldei, the villages between Lata and Long start preparations for moving to the summer villages. At the same time, traders belonging to the villages

upstream of Juma who migrate to lower areas in winter would embark on their first journey of the season. They would store their goods in the now vacant winter dwellings of the villages between Lata and Long and return to bring their families to their respective summer villages. Thus, the winter villages between Lata and Long were transformed into trade facilities during the summer. This synchronisation of movement also helped avoid direct contact between native livestock and other herds being brought up from further downstream. This proved to be a reliable method of stopping the spread of livestock disease.