

Conservation Policy and Livelihoods

Uttarakhand, now Uttaranchal, has a long history of forestry-related conflicts. Most of the mass movements in the region in the 20th century have been related, one way or the other, to forestry issues. Government control over the forests of the region began in the last two decades of the 19th century. From 1911-1917, settlement in the hills was quite extensive and all land except that which was cultivated was brought under the control of the Forest Department. This resulted in large scale protests by the mountain community and forced the government to set up a forest grievances committee to mitigate the situation. The reclassification of forests and the establishment of van panchayats in 1931 followed as a result of these movements (Ballabh 1993). Prior to colonial intervention, each village had its own defined territories of forest and an indigenous system to regulate resource use. In the post-independence period, the community institutions had been weakened and, as elsewhere, indigenous practices of conservation and the need of communities for common property resources tended to be undervalued. In the case of Nanda Devi, the area was notified as a sanctuary in 1939. It was declared a national park in 1982.

The traditional alpine meadows of Lata and Paing villages became part of the Park. For Lata, the worst blow was the inclusion of the Dharansi area in the Park's core zone. This changed the resource-rich profile of these villages to resource-poor. In 2004, Jayal who was instrumental in the formation of the Nanda Devi National Park in 1983, had suggested safeguarding traditional rights by shifting the core area further beyond the Dibrugheta area. The Forest Department launched a series of compensatory schemes, but inherent problems in the design of the compensation package, according to the ex-gram pradhan of Lata, created a new vested interest group in the form of petty contractors, who collaborated with the department in siphoning off funds for other uses, fragmenting the society. The first Biosphere Management Plan for NDBR was formulated in 1993. Of the annual planned budget of US\$ 190,000, 58% was allocated for salaries and facilities for the staff, compared to 21% for eco-development, and 11.8% for research and education (Mohan 1993). Maikhuri et al (2000) have indicated the legal emphasis of the NDBR management plan, which paid little attention to the livelihoods of the local communities. There was resentment against the national park as early as 1987, when representatives from the villages of the Niti Valley conducted a large meeting at Reni. The agenda of the meeting was the function of the Forest Department, the increasing wildlife menace, rural unemployment, and the collection of NTFPs. This was followed by a series of meetings in the villages.

The compensation package provided uniform relief to the villages in the buffer zone, regardless of the impact on their livelihoods as a result of NDBR's notification as a national park. This infuriated the villagers of Lata who were the worst hit. They attempted repeatedly to convince the biosphere reserve management of their conditions and the need to reassess their particular situation. But the management gave no indication that they understood. This led to the refusal of the village to accept the limited compensation provided by the department. The non-cooperation

movement started by the people of Lata in 1995/96 further prompted the department to divert funds to the less affected and more cooperative villages.

In 1998, Lata started a 'jhapto chheeno' movement and sought cooperation from the entire Niti Valley. A minor issue triggered the movement. The Forest Department refused to pay compensation for livestock killed by wild bears, stating that there was no provision for killings by herbivorous animals and indirectly suggesting that the killings were caused by a leopard rather than a bear. This angered the villagers who actually experienced the bear menace.

The post-Chipko phase had led to a deep sense of frustration amongst local activists who had played an important role in the earlier movement. They realised that issues of equity and community involvement and the demands of the movement had taken a back seat, while a eulogised image of Chipko had taken over, which served the interests of an emerging group of environmental conservationists.

Chipko veterans like Govind Singh Rawat had, since 1987, been criticising both the conservation policy of the government and the failure of the Chipko movement to consolidate the stakes of the community in natural resource management. Matters came to a head and hundreds of villagers entered the restricted core zone of the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve on 15 July 1998. This forced entry was a symbolic assertion and reclamation of their traditional rights. The state government deployed armed police at Lata Kharak, but they were later withdrawn. Jhapto cheeno served as a major landmark in the conflict between NDBR and the local communities and was, in a way, a natural progression or rather completion of what had been left unfinished by the Chipko movement. The wider coverage of the jhapto cheeno movement helped in polarising the pro-people activists and groups, which eventually emerged as more organised under a unified advocacy campaign.