

From Confrontation to Conflict Resolution

The period 1998-99 witnessed resentment and protests in most of the protected areas in Uttarakhand. There were rumblings in Govind Pashu Vihar, Rajaji National Park, Binsar Sanctuary, and the Askot Musk Deer Sanctuary. Although the communities in each area were protesting, there was no linkage or cohesion among the various groups. A meeting was organised in 1999 at Dehradun to understand the issues of protected areas as part of a case study being conducted by social activist Hem Gairola. Gram pradhans, block pramukhs, and social activists from some of the protected areas in Uttarakhand attended the meeting. The community representatives sought to establish a common platform for addressing their problems; it was decided not to rush into institution building but to continue with interactive meetings and let the institutional structure evolve from the grassroots.

In June 2000, an extended meeting of representatives from all the protected areas in what would become Uttaranchal was organised at Mussoorie. The meeting culminated in the formation of Vanaadhikar, an organisation of the representatives of protected areas in Uttarakhand. The NGO, Janadhar, took on the responsibility of running the secretariat of Vanaadhikar. On behalf of the NGO Network, 'Alliance for Development', consensus emerged on the following issues.

- The Alliance for Development agreed to support and empower the grassroots leadership in addressing the forestry issue rather than the Alliance taking the lead in the process.
- Greater interaction and experience sharing was needed among activists and social workers of the protected areas.
- Vanaadhikar agreed to strive for community rights over natural resources while creating a pro-active space for local communities in the conservation of biodiversity.
- Conservation and community rights would be included in the gram panchayats' agenda.

The gram sabha of Lata acted on the recommendations and passed a set of rules for the conservation of biodiversity in the area within its jurisdiction.

On 9 November 2000 the new state of Uttaranchal was formed from the hill districts of Uttar Pradesh (the Kumaon and Garhwal divisions or Uttarakhand). The creation of Uttaranchal was a major political development in the region; people began thinking of working towards fulfilling their local aspirations. Nanda Devi became a priority issue for the new state government, which in 2001 assigned a team from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF) to enter the core zone to explore and assess the potential of reopening the park for tourism. This team refused to agree to or accept the rules of the gram panchayat of Lata, which led to a confrontation. This was not just a confrontation between a committee of the Ministry of

Environment and Forests, State Government of India, and the gram sabha of Lata, but also between some of the renowned mountaineers of India and their former porters. In the ensuing debate, the gram sabha of Lata emerged as a legitimate institution for biodiversity conservation.

Prior to the IMF controversy, the local people had focused their efforts on the restoration of their traditional rights and opening the core zone for tourism. However, they realised that in the new initiative travel agents from outside had intended to bypass them. They realised they needed an impact assessment of the restrictions and a definition of the equity and rights of the local communities in relation to the emerging tourism business. This led to the Nanda Devi Declaration of 14th October 2001 (see Annex) and publication of the 'Sangarshnama', detailing the local history of the post-Chipko events. The gram sabha of Lata, in collaboration with the Alliance for Development, organised a national workshop on community-based conservation and ecotourism and formulated a plan for community-based tourism.

In 2002, a new state government was elected in Uttaranchal. Various factors, including the Nanda Devi controversy, prompted some changes in the elected representatives, and a new 'pro people' director was appointed to head the NDBR.

In 2003, the state government issued orders for the partial opening of the Nanda Devi National Park core zone for limited ecotourism activities. The government order specifically stressed ecotourism and involvement of the local communities. With this, the demand of the local communities was met at least partially, although a large part of the community's agenda remains unanswered. The level of economic damage as a result of the creation of the protected area is becoming clearer from the various impact assessment studies and is likely to become a contentious issue. The Forest Department believes that the demands of the local communities have been adequately addressed and that they will benefit from the planned ecotourism activities of the department. However, the gram sabha of Lata, along with activists disenchanted with the post-opening process, have decided to carry on their struggle and advocacy efforts.

The major factors leading to the opening of the park were:

- establishment of the issue through a sustained struggle by the people of the Niti Valley;
- formation of a separate mountain state of Uttaranchal, which was also a result of a long struggle by the mountain communities;
- presence of a comparatively more sensitive state bureaucracy with the deputation of sincere forest officers to the posts of director and deputy director of the NDBR;
- role of advocacy groups in providing backstage support to the local leadership and acting as interface during the crucial phase of the negotiations; and
- publication of impact assessment studies by the scientists of GB Pant Institute of Himalayan Research & Development.

Among other activities the gram sabha of Lata organised and celebrated the 'Republic Day of India' as a women's festival. On the occasion, the gram sabha of Lata honoured traditional medicine practitioners, folk musicians, and famous guides and mountaineers of the area. The emphasis was on conserving traditional knowledge and skills of the community (Gusain 2004). Another development was the people's collective decision to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the decisive action by Gaura Devi and 26 other women of Reni on the 26th of March 2004.

In 2002, the Alliance for Development participated in ICIMOD's workshop on 'Equity and Poverty in the Management of Common Property Resources in the Hindu Kush Himalayas'. The study on which this publication is based was conducted as part of ICIMOD's research initiative. The study provided a clearer understanding of the traditional management systems and the nature of the inherent inequities in the traditional system. While the issue of equity was present in the people's agenda prior to the ICIMOD research programme, it was not well defined. The present study, conducted in association with some of the local activists, allowed for the creation of space in the advocacy campaign to ensure analysis and monitoring of equity aspects as an ongoing process. The crucial factor that remains is institutionalising equity within its community-based institutions.

The Nanda Devi advocacy campaign has gradually matured to raise some of the fundamental issues by defining 'wilderness' as a common property resource. Rana et al. (2003) argue that wilderness is the combined impact of natural resources and unique geographical location. Mountain communities own the forests in the form of van panchayats or village commons, and the wilderness of the area should also be considered from a tourism perspective as a common property resource. The argument stresses the need to consider mountain communities as stakeholders and not mere beneficiaries in mountain tourism.

After 2001, the Nanda Devi process was publicised through various media and platforms and began attracting worldwide attention, particularly after the initial postings on the 'Mountain Forum' website the same year (www.mtnforum.org). As a result of this, a number of researchers and volunteers have become associated with the Nanda Devi movement and have helped in raising the concerns of the Bhotiya community at various national and international fora. The Association of the Alliance for Development, helped by ICIMOD's 'Equity and Poverty' Programme, added a valuable dimension to the movement in 2003 by establishing a permanent presence on the Internet with the creation of the web site <www.nandadevi.prayaga.org>. The website has become a platform for the convergence of community-based conservation campaigns in Uttaranchal.