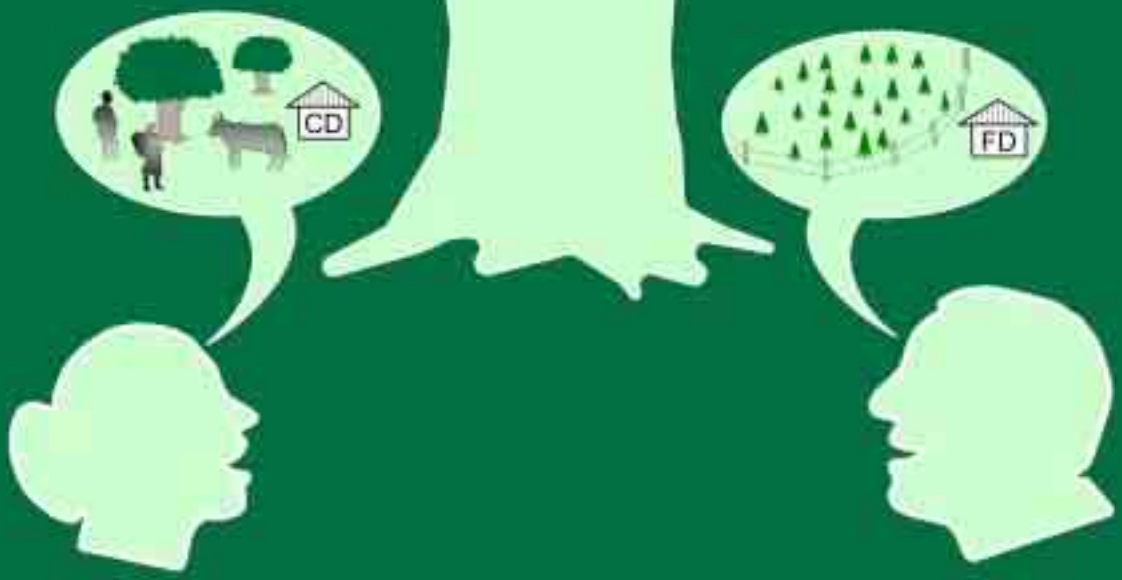
The Politics of Cooperative Forest Management

The Kangra Experience, Himachal Pradesh



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Talking Points

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'Talking Points' is a new series from ICIMOD that will contain short presentations of topical, controversial, or problematic themes, where general consensus has not yet been reached or where action may be appropriate. They are intended to stimulate thought and discussion, their contents should not be seen as definitive statements.

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Rajeev Ahal

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A.B. Murray Shrestha (Editor)
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Dedicated to the Countless Community Forestry Groups Committed to the Sustainable Management of Their Forest Resources in the Himalayas

foreword

Across the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region, the way in which forests and other natural resources are managed is profoundly important for the well being of the people since a large portion of the population depends on the forests in their day-to-day life. For mountain people the loss of forest resources can be catastrophic, many are still dependent on forests for fuel, building materials, fodder, and other products. Healthy forest resources are also essential for the well-being of the mountain environment. Loss of forest cover is contributing to problems like increased land degradation, landslides and floods, downstream siltation, loss of habitat, reduced biodiversity, loss of water resources, and even climate change. Maintaining forest resources has become a challenge, however, in face of the increasing demands both for land and for forest products as a result of population growth, increased aspirations, and improved access – which brings with it increased opportunities for exploitation and export.

Historically, in many areas of the HKH, forest management has been centrally directed, and governments resorted to protection and policing where these resources were to be preserved – generally with limited success. Recently, there has been a paradigm shift in the approach to forest management. It is now well recognised, that to ensure good forest management the people most closely concerned — the forest users – must be actively involved and able to take decisions, carry out tasks, and also benefit. People-centred forest policies have emerged in almost all the countries in the region. An increasing area is being brought under community management in one form or another through different benefit-sharing systems and tenure arrangements. Participatory forest management (PFM) has emerged as a successful strategy in almost all of the region's countries.

One of the earliest recorded examples of an attempt to formally involve communities in forest management took place in Kangra District, now in Himachal Pradesh, India. The Kangra Forest Cooperative Societies were initiated in 1940. Unlike later initiatives in the same area, these societies were authorised to manage all types of forest land, not just to rehabilitate degraded areas – although this was clearly the main focus. Looked at from today's perspective, the cooperatives had serious shortcomings in terms of representation and equity (not a subject of concern in the 1940s!), but they were successful in regenerating degraded forest areas and developing a feeling of ownership and pride in the villagers. The cooperatives fell foul of the organisational changes associated with the establishment of the new state of Himachal Pradesh in 1971, and of the HP Forest Departments apparent lack of commitment to genuine community forestry and unwillingness to allow communities to really manage and take decisions about their forests. The existence of these societies is still a matter of dispute, although many continue to function in a legal limbo.

The history of the Kangra cooperatives provides fascinating lessons for community forestry today on what does and doesn't work and why. Analysis of the past, and comparison with other initiatives in the same district, throws light on many problems: the fundamental attitudes of government departments and staff; commitment to and distrust of genuine community involvement; legal definitions of forest, users, and other terms and their implications; interpretation of the idea of 'community forestry' – use of the community to protect and regenerate government forests for the benefit of the state on the one hand, handing over management of forest to a community so that community needs can be met and guaranteed in

the long term on the other. All of these and more can be found in this document, which analyses the history of the cooperatives, the political developments related to them, the state of other initiatives in Kangra, and the present situation – including the future of the cooperatives themselves. The ideas are not only relevant for decisions now being taken in Himachal Pradesh, they provide insights that will be useful to foresters and policy-makers across the region.

ICIMOD, through its Natural Resources Division, has taken an active interest over the past years in the introduction of community forestry in various forms in countries across the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region, and its contribution to enabling more sustainable use and management of natural resources. We have endeavoured to collect and disseminate information about different practices and to bring different groups together to exchange views and to develop partnerships that contribute to the success of community forestry. This book is a further contribution to this process.

It is a thought provoking document, and we hope it will stimulate discussion – and action – that will help facilitate the successful introduction of community forestry across the region.

Anupam Bhatia

author's preface

This paper examines the Kangra Forest Cooperative Society experience of Himachal Pradesh, one of the earliest experiments in joint forest management, initiated in 1940, which became a subject of disagreement and remains in continuing dispute. The historical overview and review of past processes and milestones is based on a combination of information about the cooperatives themselves and information on the quality of the forests. Recent policy developments are also reviewed and critical issues for the future discussed.

While my involvement with the Kangra Forest Cooperative Society scheme began in 1988, it was only in 1996 that I began to probe into the details that were hidden from the public eye. When starting work on this study, I realised the paucity of recorded historical data and facts concerning Himachal Pradesh, especially with regard to the Kangra Forest Cooperative Society scheme. Furthermore, because Kangra District had been transferred from Punjab State to Himachal Pradesh, many crucial notifications, records, and items of correspondence were not traceable, probably lost somewhere in the transfer.

A further constraint resulted from the fact that the Forest Department had maintained no consolidated records of the Kangra Forest Cooperative Societies. However, the registration files of some of the societies themselves contained detailed records of correspondence, memos, inspection notes, and case sheets of conflicts, which were available in the offices of the assistant registrars of the societies. In addition, some societies have kept, in wooden boxes full of flaking yellow papers, detailed records of documents, resolutions, and the minutes of their meetings over the last fifty years. These were an invaluable asset for my research. Many leaders of active societies provided a rich oral history that I collected in interviews. Based on the above sources, I have been able to reconstruct and analyse the events in some detail.

During the first stage of the study, I developed an understanding of the history, the systems of land tenure and the methods of forest management that have prevailed in Kangra over the centuries. This formed the background against which the detail of the scheme emerged. I conducted a literature survey, studying crucial authoritative documents and settlement reports, as well as earlier published works (see Bibliography). After this, I made an extensive tour of the district. From this I was able to classify the societies into distinct groups. I conducted numerous interviews with active members of the societies and with the grass roots level staff of the forest and cooperative departments to identify issues arising from the Kangra Forest Cooperative Society experiment, and spent a considerable time examining the available records. Based on these, I was able to identify and prioritise important issues and questions, developing a format of queries to be addressed to the societies themselves. Using this format, a team toured representative societies to collect primary information and detailed responses from members and from the leadership. In putting this information down on paper, I have tried to explore the larger picture of participatory forest management before offering any suggestions.

My intention is to present this paper in simple, non-technical language in order to make it accessible to lay people as well as experts, without compromising facts and precision. I have, moreover, no desire to malign individuals or institutions, but simply to portray them as I have seen them in the given context.

Rajeev Ahal
Palampur, Himachal Pradesh, India

executive summary

This paper examines the Kangra Forest Cooperative Societies (KFCS) of Himachal Pradesh (HP), providing an historical overview and reviewing past processes and milestones. An overview of Kangra's prevailing land settlement and revenue system is included to facilitate the reader's understanding of the background of forest management against which the KFCS and subsequent participatory forest management (PFM) initiatives have been taken.

In the Kangra hills, as elsewhere in the Himalayas, forests play a major role in shaping people's socioeconomic destiny and the state's political strength, and changes in systems of forest management radically redefine the relationship of people to their forests. British policies restricted people's access to major forest areas and reduced their dependence on them by turning them into commercial monoculture forests. At the same time, the government inhibited pastoralism, a major occupation in the hills, forcing people into settled agriculture.

The Forest Department blamed uncontrolled grazing and illegal felling for the deforestation and soil erosion of undemarcated forests, failing to understand the role its own revenue-oriented policies played. Concern about forest conservation coupled with poor financial returns led to a changed management strategy whereby the forest department began to devolve more responsibility for forest protection to the people and give them a share of the profits of sale.

Following recommendations made by a commission of enquiry in the late 1930s, the Punjab Government ordered the Forest Department to implement a scheme that would enable villages to manage their own forest property under the supervision of qualified forest officers. In 1940, the KFCS scheme was officially sanctioned, and over a 12-year period, 72 societies were formed, with nearly 2,800 square kilometres of land. In independent India, the political will supporting the scheme declined after 1956, and in 1961 specific orders were passed against forming new societies.

When Kangra District became part of Himachal Pradesh (HP) in 1971, the HP Forest Department refused to recognise the legality of the KFCS' claims on their right to manage their own forests and insisted that the forests be managed by HP Forest Department staff as per the territorial working plans. Great confusion over the scheme's legal status ensued, leading the different departments involved to withdraw their support for a participatory forest management initiative they had hitherto accepted and sustained. Notwithstanding this position, many of these societies have remained active until today, albeit in reduced form, basing their legality on the still extant registration as cooperatives.

This publication describes the basic principles and rules pertaining to the formation and running of the KFCS and provides a detailed analysis of their operations. The choice of institutional form, the criteria for membership and for selection of areas, and the financial systems developed by the scheme, are all discussed. The paper points out that the initiative's most fundamental achievement could be the effort to re-establish workable systems of community control by redefining the balance between rights and responsibilities. While the expression 'people's participation' figures nowhere in KFCS notifications, the emphasis on consulting the society and the villagers in the preparation of the working plans reveals a space for consultative participation, unlike conventional forest conservancy.

The author stresses the importance of analysing the processes the government set in motion when organising people into the KFCS scheme in the 1940s, and seeks to determine whether the newly created institutions were actually community-based or merely convenient instruments created by the forest and cooperative departments 'from above' to achieve their own objectives. He also asks which groups within the village accepted the KFCS scheme as a mechanism of community managed forestry. What were their socioeconomic backgrounds and how participatory were the structures established?

The KFCS managed many different classes of land in Kangra and operated under various systems of forest management, the most important objective of which seemed to be closures that protected the forest areas from open grazing. The quality of KFCS forests supports the stand taken by members and managing committees of the KFCS that they generally managed forests better than the forest department, an opinion forest department (FD) staff also echo unofficially.

Nevertheless, since 1973, the roles, rights, and responsibilities of the KFCS and the grass roots level FD staff have overlapped, and the KFCS forests' wealth has been taken without compensation to the KFCS members. Currently, confusion prevails about the roles, present status, and the future of the entire KFCS initiative. Before attempting to look for solutions, the author tries to analyse the roles being played and the positions being taken by each stakeholder institution: the state governments, the Forest Department, the Cooperatives Department, and the KFCS themselves.

The study also examines the situation today where, despite the assumption of the HP Government that the PFM experiment is in a state of suspended animation, the KFCS are quite alive and active, and angry at their treatment and how the state has sought to unilaterally appropriate the basis of their rights and their existence. The issue of reviving these KFCS is important in itself, and is one aspect of the overall fight to ensure an appropriate and enabling environment for participatory and sustainable forest management in HP.

The study's final chapter begins by reviewing the recent history of PFM in Himachal Pradesh in order to help us understand what the future might hold. Several specific projects are discussed, as are the HP Government's draft PFM rules and the forest sector review conducted during 1999 to 2000. Analysing this, the author finds several central themes that run through all PFM experiments: a temporary or time-bound nature; the formation of new, transient, village organisations to protect and manage degraded areas through closure and plantation; the disguised benefit of wage-work for non-forest based asset creation or plantation work that temporarily relieves pressure from the nearby protected forests; and a concept of 'jointness' that has the village committees take over the more onerous roles from the FD while leaving true control as well as major long-term benefits very much with the department itself.

Thus, the FD currently seems to use PFM mainly as a means to attract substantial foreign donor contributions and to relieve some of the communities' pent-up pressure over the alienation of their forest wealth and their lack of access and control. It seems that the department has not really incorporated the lessons demonstrated by PFM into forest management systems.

The study concludes with a discussion of the future of the KFCS and emerging lessons for the future of sustainable forest management in HP. Many fundamental changes are suggested, including mainstreaming PFM, changing forest land use, reclassifying forest lands, converting individual rights to community rights, strengthening sustainable forest-based livelihoods, and rationalising the role of people's institutions. The KFCS approach demonstrates the competence of village communities not only to regenerate and manage their forests sustainably, but also to generate incomes for individual as well as social development.

acknowledgements

Thanks go to Mr. Egbert Pelinck, former Director General of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), for facilitating and supporting this research. I am also grateful to Mr. Anupam Bhatia, Coordinator in ICIMOD's Participatory Natural Resources Management Division, who believed that research and writing on Kangra Forest Cooperative Societies was important in order to determine the issues facing participatory forestry in the Himalayas, and more specifically in the degraded Siwaliks and Himachal. His valuable insights, comments, and patience were a great help. Mr. Joginder Singh Guleria's in-depth knowledge of the history of forest societies and the intricate legal aspects were a constant help and his enthusiasm provided steadfast moral support.

I would like to extend special thanks to Professor Hans Wienold, whose suggestions and analyses helped me sharpen the focus of the final paper, and to Mr. Pamin Katoch, who supervised the field research and worked tirelessly to dig out lost information. The staff of the forest, cooperative, and revenue departments also deserve thanks for their help. I wish to thank all the members of the KFCS and all the nameless others who contributed to this research and who have been infinitely patient with my enquiries. Discussions with members of Navrachna helped clear up the cobwebs of confusion many times. Finally, I would like to thank my wife Manju for tolerating the frustrations of an activist trying, without any formal background, to be an academic – a husband who always forgot to bring home the vegetables but instead returned with yet another pile of papers.

I would very much appreciate the comments and criticism of readers.

glossary

antodaya	poorest of the poor
bajri	gravel
ban maufi	concessions given by the government in the 1860s to ten specific village communities of kangra district when taking over their land for tea plantations; the soil and trees were owned by the villagers, under the trusteeship of the deputy commissioner
ban sarkar	forest land vested with the forest department
bartandar	those who have a right over land or trees in a protected forest that belongs to someone else, e.g. the government
crore	ten million (one hundred lakhs)
demarcated protected forest	the trees belonged to the government, subject to the reservation of the rights of the users, and the soil to the people; no appropriation of land was permitted in these forests and a quarter to a third of the total forest area could be closed for regeneration.
devta committee	religious committee
durbar	a public audience
gair mumkin	uncultivable lands
gharats	traditional water-powered mills for grinding grain
gram panchayat	elected village level body for local self-governance, often called simply 'panchayat'
khewatdar	(also khetwatdar) persons entitled to a right by virtue of sole or joint property in the subject of the right, such as a common property resource
lakh	one hundred thousand
lambardar	the traditional legal institution for revenue collection in a village, in return for a commission, the lambardar collected land revenue on behalf of the government
mahila mandal	an official women's organisation with committees in all villages
malkiat shamlat	originally common lands which were later converted to private lands by the revenue department and on which tax is levied
mauza	a unit of the revenue department (under British Rule) consisting of a collection of hamlets with patches of cultivation and undefined or unrecorded rights of the residents in the

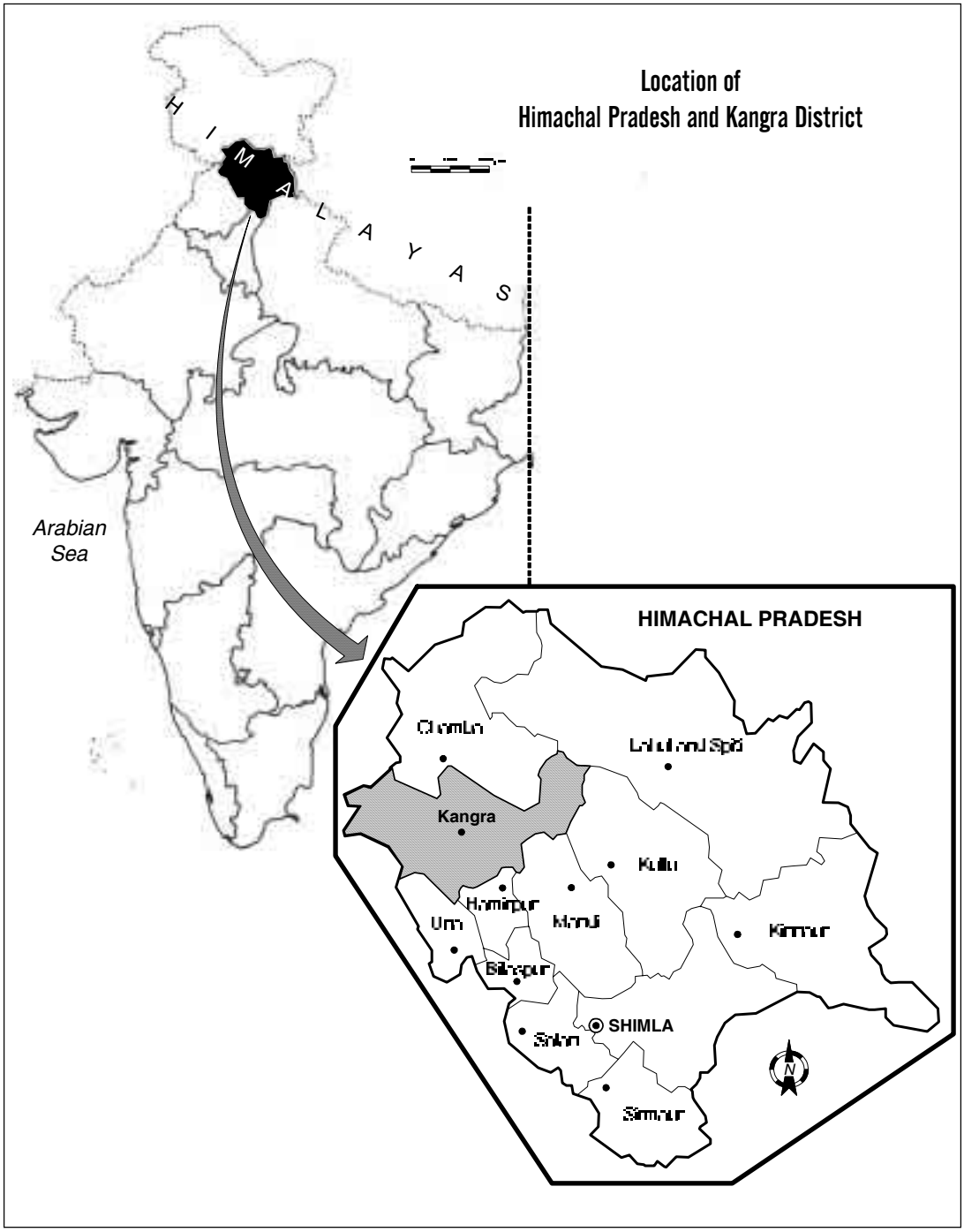
	surrounding wastes; the ownership of all soil and forest land was transferred to a copropriety body formed from the residents; the revenue for the entire mauza was assessed as a lump sum by the government, payment was made the joint responsibility of the body
patwari	village land revenue official
rakha	forest guard
reserved forest	the absolute property of the government, with no rights of users allowed
sangarsh samiti	advocacy group/committee/organisation
Sanjhi Van Yojna	a participatory forest management scheme similar to 'joint forest management', but financed from Himachal Pradesh's state budget, launched in 1998/1999
shamlat tika	a tika within a mauza that is composed entirely of shamlat lands
shamlat	common land in which rights are enjoyed by the bartandars of the village
tehsil	the lowest unit of administration under British rule, consisting of a certain number of mauzas; the tehsildar was the administrative and revenue head of the tehsil; a group of tehsils constituted a district.
tika	a hamlet with too few residents to qualify as a village or mauza
unclassed forest	the trees belonged to the government and the soil to the people, no closures could be made except with the people's consent
undemarcated protected forest	both planted trees and those of spontaneous growth belonged to the government and the soil to the people; cultivation was permitted with the deputy commissioner's consent; closures could only be made with the consent of the right holding villages. This type of forest was not closed to grazing.
usufruct	the right to enjoy the use of and income from another's property; in the Himalayan region used to mean the benefits themselves (the income and produce)
van andolan	forest protest movement by a local community
van panchayat	elected local area body for forest management
warisee	hereditary 'right of use' that could be mortgaged and recovered like property
wazib-ul-arz	the administrative record of the village kept in the settlement document
zamindars	landowning farmers who pay revenue to the government, and who also have corresponding rights (bartandars) in the resources of the mauza, such as forests or flowing water for irrigation

acronyms & abbreviations

AR	assistant registrar
BM	ban maufi
CD	cooperatives department
CF	conservator of forests
CPR	common property resources
DFID	Department for International Development (UK) — formerly ODA
DFO	district forest office/district forest officer
DPF	demarcated protected forest
EC	executive committee
FD	forest department
FSR	Forest Sector Review
GB	general body
GO	government order
GOI	Government of India
GP	gram panchayat
GTZ	(Deutsche) Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German Technical Cooperation)
HP	Himachal Pradesh
HPFP	HP Forestry Project
JFM	joint forest management
IGCP	Indo-German Changer Project
ICIMOD	International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
IGDP	Indo German Dhauladhar Project
IRMP	integrated resource management plan
KFCS	Kangra Forest Cooperative Society/Societies
masl	metres above (mean) sea level
MC	managing committee
MM	mahila mandal
MS	malkiat shamlat
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NRM	natural resources management
NTFP	non-timber forest produce
PFM	participatory forest management
PW	private wasteland
RF	reserved forest
Rs	rupees
SFM	sustainable forest management
SVY	Sanjhi Van Yojna

TD	timber distribution
TRUCO	trust and confidence
UF	unclassed forest
UPF	undemarcated protected forest
VDC	village development committee
VEDS	village eco-development society
VFDC	village forest development committee
VFDS	village forest development society
VLI	village level institution
VLRK	Van Lagao Rozi Kamao
WP	working plan

Contents


Location of
Himachal Pradesh and Kangra District
H I M A L A Y A S
Arabian
Sea
HIMACHAL PRADESH
Kangra
Kullu
Mandi
Kinnaur
SHIMLA
Sirmaur
N