

# 3 Community Forestry (*Van Panchayats*) in Uttarakhand

The *van panchayats* of the UP hill areas are a testimony to innovative management techniques for natural resources. Local communities were involved in forest management in 1931, following many years of intense agitation and protest against the British policy of extending state control over forests. The Kumaon Forest Grievance Committee was set up to resolve the problem in 1921. The Committee recommended the creation of Class I and Class II areas among the new reserves. Class I Forests were under the control of the Civil Administration and further classified into Civil, Soyam, and *Van Panchayat* Forests. In July 1931, *Van Panchayat* Rules were introduced under the District Scheduled Act of 1874 and the formation of *van panchayats* was started. A more powerful Act, invoking the long neglected Section 28 (Village Forest Formation) of the Indian Forest Act of 1927, was made in 1972 and modified in 1976. At present the *van panchayats* are managed under this Act. However, as a result of the dual control of these forests by the Revenue and Forest Departments, the proper management and upkeep of forests, sustainable use, and full community involvement has not really been achieved under the *van panchayats*. In 1982, the UP Government set up the Sultan Singh Bhandari Committee to review the *van panchayat* Act of 1976 and to suggest ways for further consolidating the provisions of the Act. The committee submitted its report in 1983. Several meetings were held with *van panchayat sarpanches* between 1983 and 1988. The Commissioner of Kumaon then published a tentative draft rule for general public review and suggestions for enactment in 1989.

The draft rules are still under the consideration of the government.

## 3.1 Current Legal Provisions, Functions and Procedures of *Van Panchayats*

### 3.1.1 Areas Where *Van Panchayats* Can Be Formed (Section 5)

A *van panchayat* can be formed on any government land within the *sal assi* boundary of a village, including Civil Forest, Class I, and Class II Reserve Forest lands.

### 3.1.2 Procedure for Forming *Van Panchayats* (Sections 6-10)

If a village wishes to form a *van panchayat*, the village assembly must pass a resolution with a two-thirds majority and submit an application to the sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) for registration. On receipt of the application, the SDM asks the *patwari* to conduct an inquiry and submit a report on the appropriateness of forming a *van panchayat*. The SDM then inquires among the villagers and residents of neighbouring villages if they have any objections. The inquiry made at this stage is meant to ensure that most villagers are willing to form a *van panchayat*, and that the rights of the villagers and neighbouring villagers are safeguarded. After following up on any objections, the SDM forwards the application with his recommendations to the district magistrate (DM). The DM then directs the forest *panchayat*

inspector (FPI), through the SDM, to hold an election to constitute a *van panchayat* committee of 5 to 9 members. The date, time, and place of the election are notified in the village through the chairman of the village assembly (*gaon sabha*) and the village *patwari*. Anyone who has the right to vote and fulfills the following requirements is eligible to stand for membership of the *van panchayat* committee. Candidates

- should be above 18 years of age;
- should possess good moral character and should not have had any court conviction for any crime such as cheating, or fraud;
- should not be a defaulter on a loan repayment to the *gram panchayat* or any other organisation;
- should not hold any position of profit in any government or semi-government organisation; and
- should possess a sound mind and not be suffering from contagious diseases.

Once a *van panchayat* committee is formed, an *amin* (surveyor) is asked to survey the area of the *van panchayat* and prepare a map and a *khasra* (a document showing rights of possession and ownership of land). At the same time, the elected members of the committee frame laws under the direction of the FPI. All these documents are sent to the *forest panchayat officers* (FPOs) who, after scrutinising them, forward them to the DM who sends them to the commissioner for approval and sanction. All the expenditure incurred in the survey and preparation of maps and *khasra* is born by the villagers. The official forms used during the formation of *van panchayats* are listed in Table 3.1.

Under Section 11, the villagers are required to submit a draft working plan for the management of the forests. Under Section 13, the conservator and DFO concerned must be informed about the formation of a *van panchayat* once the process is complete.

**Table 3.1: List of Forms Used in the Formation of Van Panchayats**

Form No.	Title	Description
-	Petition	A petition from the village calling for formation of a <i>van panchayat</i> , signed by at least 2/3 of the adult residents of a village. Sent to the DFO.
KPF 5	Notice	Sent by the Sub-divisional Magistrate (SDM) via the <i>patwari</i> to the interested village and adjacent villages, apprising them of the proposed formation and inviting objections if any within 30 days.
KPF 8	<i>Karyalay, Van Panchayat Nirikshak</i>	From the SDM to the relevant <i>patwari</i> , asking for village information as per the 12 point schedule.
KPF15	Notice (Suchna)	From the SDM to the petitioning village, giving the date for demarcation of the <i>van panchayat</i> boundary and for hearing and settling objections of other villagers.
-	<i>Khasra Hathbandi Van Panchayat</i>	The area of different categories of Reserve and Civil Forest included in the <i>van panchayat</i> and details of boundary pillars.
KPF 3	<i>Chunav patra</i>	List of the elected members and <i>sarpanch</i> of the <i>van panchayat</i> and signatures of residents on the reserve side of the form.
KPF 6	Agreement	Duties of the <i>van panchayat</i> (including registers to maintain) which are agreed to and signed by the <i>panches</i> .
CK 53	Form No. CK 53	Details of the <i>van panchayat</i> formation process (with dates), including checks on whether various steps were followed, sent to the commissioner for approval.
-	<i>Yojna</i>	A management plan for the <i>van panchayat</i> and bye-laws for the <i>van panchayat</i> (standard), signed by the <i>panches</i> .

### 3.1.3 Functions of van panchayats

The members and *sarpanch* are elected for five years. At the village-level, a *van panchayat* committee headed by the *sarpanch* is the sole arbitrator for management of the *van panchayat* forest. The election to a *van panchayat* committee is conducted under the supervision of an officer nominated by the SDM. In most cases, members in *van panchayat* committees are represented in proportion to the number of households belonging to the *van panchayat*. All decisions are taken by a two-thirds majority. The *patwari* and a nominee of the DFO can attend the meetings, which are held every quarter, but they do not have any voting rights (Section 16).

*Van panchayats*, being under the administrative control of the Revenue Department, are supervised and regulated by the SDM or DM and their subordinates. However, the Forest Department is responsible for the preparation of working plans, marking of trees for auctions, resin tapping, and giving permission to extract non-timber forest products (NTFP). The officers in the two departments at different levels associated with *van panchayats* are summarised in Table 3.2.

According to the *Van Panchayat Niyamavali* of 1976, the *van panchayats* have the following responsibilities (Section 18):

- to protect and develop the forests falling under their jurisdiction;

- to fell only those trees that are marked by the Forest Department and that are silviculturally available;
- to distribute equally the (fresh) products among the right holders;
- to demarcate boundaries by building boundary walls, pillars, or similar, and to prevent encroachment of the forest land;
- to close 20 per cent of the area to grazing; and
- to protect forests from illegal felling and fire.

The *van panchayats* possess the following powers (Section 19).

- *Van panchayats* enjoy the powers of a forest officer.
- They can sell fallen twigs and grass for the bonafide domestic use of the right holders in the village with the prior approval of the DFO. They can levy and realise fines up to Rs. 50 and can compound cases up to Rs. 500 with the prior approval of the Deputy Commissioner.
- They can confiscate implements used for illicit logging.
- They can impound stray cattle.
- With the previous approval of the DM, they can sell stolen timber and other stolen forest products seized by them.
- *Van panchayats* can issue permits for the collection of fuel, fodder, slate, and boulders and realise fees. However the approval of the Deputy Commissioner is required for removal or sale of any other kind of forest

**Table 3.2: The Different Levels of Officers in the Revenue and Forest Departments Associated with Van Panchayats**

Level	Revenue Department	Forest Department
At the district level	District magistrate	Conservator of forests (CF) Divisional forest officer (DFO)
At the subdivision and tehsil levels	Subdivision magistrate (ex-officio) Forest panchayat inspector (FPI) Forest panchayat officer (FPO)	Subdivision officer, forests (SDO) Range officer Forester
At the village level	<i>Patwari</i> , <i>sarpanch</i> , <i>van panchayat</i> , and <i>van panchayat</i> committee	Forest guard

product, and the DC will in turn seek the opinion of the Forest Department. The Forest Department can only mark trees and ensure their disposal through the Forest Corporation. In the case of auction of forest products, confidential estimates are to be prepared by the Forest Department. After fixing the confidential value, items up to Rs. 5,000 can be auctioned by the *van panchayats* themselves.

- The *sarpanch* can, with the approval of the committee, mark one tree and sell to a right holder for domestic use.
- *Van panchayats* can form their own byelaws.
- *Van panchayats* may not extract resin on their own.

Section 21 makes it mandatory for the Forest Department to prepare working plans for *van panchayats* that *van panchayats* are supposed to implement. Any deviation can be approved by the chief conservator of forests (CCF) concerned (Section - 22).

Every year, starting from 1st April, *van panchayats* must prepare a budget of their income and expenditure. The Deputy Commissioner, in consultation with the DFO, approves this budget. There is provision for audits of *van panchayats* by the Chief Audit Officer of Uttar Pradesh under Section 36.

Under Section 33, the following revenue authorities are entrusted with the responsibility of inspecting *van panchayats* every three years. A copy of the inspection note has to be sent to the CCF and CF concerned.

- Commissioner - Five inspections per district.
- Deputy Commissioner - Fifteen inspections in their respective districts.
- Forest *Panchayat* Officer/SDM - Twenty-five inspections.
- FPIs - At least 33 per cent of all *van panchayats* under their command.

Apart from the above inspections, the Forest Department (FD) is also supposed to inspect the functioning of *van panchayats* with the help of

specially appointed staff.

### 3.1.4 Income and Expenditure

Ten per cent of the total income of the *van panchayat*, goes to the FD for services such as the valuation of trees and marking trees for felling. Of the remainder, twenty per cent is given to the *zila parishad* (district council) for development of the area; 40 per cent is kept with the DM in the *van panchayat* account and can be spent by the *van panchayat* committee with the prior approval of the DM to provide community services and amenities like village roads and schools; and 40 per cent goes back to the FD for preparation and execution of development programmes for the *van panchayat* forest and for stationery, stamps, the travel allowance (TA) expenditure of the *sarpanch*, and other expenses.

### 3.2 Van Panchayat Statistics

By the end of 1997, nearly 5,000 *van panchayats* had been formed in Uttarakhand covering about 469,326 hectares, or 14 per cent of the total forest area.

The rate of formation of *van panchayats* fluctuated after promulgation of the *Van Panchayat Act* in 1931. A study conducted in Kumaon Division of Uttarakhand revealed that the process was very slow at the beginning, with the number of *van panchayats* formed peaking during the sixties and seventies (Table 3.3). After 1980, there was a steep decline in formation.

There are 15,166 inhabited villages in Uttarakhand, so the potential number of *van panchayats* is quite high. However, even the *van panchayats* formed so far are not all ecologically viable or capable of sustainable use and management, simply because the *van panchayat* areas are too small or scattered. Banerjee conducted a study of *van panchayat* size in Almora, the district with the most *van panchayats*. Only 28 per cent had an area of more than 50 hectares, 25 per cent had areas between 25 and 50 hectares, 28 per cent had an area of between 10 and 25 hectares, and 19 per cent had areas of between 1 and 10 hectares.

**Table 3.3: Formation Rate of Van Panchayats in Kumaon**

Decade	Number of Van Panchayats Formed		
	Nainital	Almora	Pithoragarh
1920 - 30	-	9	17
1930 - 40	17	80	37
1940 - 50	41	320	176
1950 - 60	62	290	25
1960 - 70	60	331	298
1970 - 80	20	591	289
1980 - 90	2	100	75
1990 -	1	10	17

The overall distribution and total area of *van panchayats* in the eight districts in Uttarakhand is shown in Table 3.4.

### 3.3 Problems of Van Panchayats

Most of the problems that are faced by *van panchayats* in their day-to-day functioning can be grouped under three major headings: pre-formation problems, post-formation problems, and management and technical problems.

#### 1.3.1 Pre-Formation Problems

##### Land Availability

Identification and availability of suitable land of suitable size adjoining a village is a major problem. According to Section 5 of the *Van Panchayat Rules of 1976*, *van panchayats* can

be formed within the *sal assi* boundary of a village on any uncultivated land. Both Reserve Forests (under the Forest Department) and Protected Forests (under the Revenue Department) are included within *sal assi* boundaries. The process of formation of *van panchayats* is the prerogative of the Revenue Department, thus where formation of a *van panchayat* involves Reserve Forest it is difficult to resolve the matter between the two departments. The amount of Civil Forest land available for a village is a further limiting point, because such lands are not equitably distributed.

##### Encroachment

Civil Forest lands have often been encroached on by extension of cultivation and other non-forest activities. Formation of *van panchayats* on such lands is not supported by parties with

**Table 3.4: The Distribution of Van Panchayats by District**

District	No. of Tehsils	No. of Blocks	No. of Inhabited Van Panchayats	No. of Van Panchayats	No. of Deputed FPIs
Nainital	8	15	1799	205	1
Almora	4	14	3024	1770	4
Pithoragarh	6	12	2186	1021	4
<i>Kumaon Total</i>	18	41	7009	3056	9
Chamoli	6	11	1569	658	1
Uttarakashi	4	6	678	26	-
Pauri	5	15	3205	947	1
Tehri	4	10	1959	45	1
Dehradun	2	6	746	159	-
<i>Garhwal Total</i>	21	48	8157	1811	3
Grand Total	39	89	15,166	4,867	12

vested interests in these non-forest uses. Identification of the exact area of encroachment is another problem because of the absence of proper records.

Leadership Identification

Most villages remain the stronghold of elected *gram pradhans*. Under their influence, no one attempts to take on the responsibility for formation of *van panchayats*, or the matter is relegated to the lowest rung of preference. Even if someone does venture to take up the matter on their own, he or she does not get effective help from the *gram pradhan*.

Financial Constraints

The villagers are supposed to provide financial support for the preparation of maps and *khasaras*. The leader has to go to the block office, range office, and DFO office many times to collect records. Travelling costs and other inherent costs are a limiting factor in poor villages.

Lengthy Official Procedure

The settlement of disputes, identification and removal of encroachments, issue of notices, hearing of objections, setting up of the *van panchayat* committee, and holding of elections, take a long time. The number of FPIs to support these activities is low, and they are poorly reimbursed for expenses such as travelling. If there is any litigation, the matter can take unusually long. A study done by the Centre for Development Studies of the Uttar Pradesh Academy of Administration (CDS-UPAA) found that the time taken for formation of a few randomly chosen *van panchayats* in Kumaon division varied from 6 months to 7 years (Table 3.5).

**3.3.2 Post-Formation Problems**

Voluntary Involvement

Success of the *van panchayats* depends upon the interest, innovative ability, and involvement of the *van panchayat sarpanch* and the committee members in conserving and improving the forest. Calling regular meetings, and involving all beneficiaries and stakeholders in activities, requires a lot of work. In reality, barring a few areas, these prerequisites are hardly met. Since most villagers meet their demands for forest products from the Reserve or Civil Forest areas, and very few *van panchayats* can meet all the fuel and fodder demands of the villagers, *van panchayat* activities suffer from neglect and apathy.

Awareness of Rules and Regulations

Knowledge about the *Van Panchayat Rules* and the provisions of related acts like the Indian Forest Act (IFA), the Resin Tapping Act, and the Forest Conservation Act are low, even among the *van panchayat sarpanches* and committee members. Even the revenue officials at sub-division and block levels, and the forest officials at range level, are largely unaware of these rules and acts. The villagers are unaware of their duties and powers and, in absence of a proper knowledge of the rules, the government officials fail to provide appropriate help in cases of disputes or problems. No concerted efforts have been made to raise awareness about these rules among *van panchayat* members and field level Revenue and Forest Department staff.

Boundary Settlement

Fixing the natural boundary and setting of boundary pillars is a matter of prime importance.

<b>Table 3.5: Time Taken to Form Van Panchayats</b>			
Village	District	Time Taken for Formation	Notes
Ramela Dugree	Pithoragarh	6 Months	Usual time
Gengora	Almora	18 Months	Litigation
Khurapanth	Almora	12 Months	Usual time
Unial Gaon	Almora	7 Years	Lengthy litigation
Audholi	Almora	15 Months	Usual time
Ralakot	Almora	6 Months	Usual time

However, this can only be done if proper funds are provided to the *van panchayats* and all *van panchayats* possess clear and easily understandable maps and records. In practice, these are generally not available.

### Gender Bias

Women are not provided with mandatory membership in the *van panchayat* committee under the *Panchayat Rules*, in spite of the fact that they are the key players in forest product collection. Women tend to be extremely busy and have little time to attend meetings. Above all, women have very poor access to information. Traditionally they are quite aware of rotational grazing and selective and regulated lopping, but community resources can only be maintained when all stakeholders share equal responsibility for their management.

### Poor Maintenance and Inspection of Records

Regular inspection of records by Revenue and Forest Officers is mandatory after the formation of *van panchayats*. The following records should be maintained by the *van panchayat*:

- Maps and area records
- Meeting register
- Cash book
- Receipt book
- Post office savings' pass book
- Voucher file
- Stock book
- Fine register
- Permit book and file
- File of standing orders
- Inspection register
- Tree marking hammer and seal
- Pending revenue realisation / payment register.

However, in practice, as a result of financial constraints, absence of knowledge, and poor infrastructure, *van panchayats* do not maintain proper records and records are seldom checked.

### Liaison Problems

Regular liaising with the FPI, FPO, the Revenue Department, the Forest Department, and the

*gram pradhan* is required for proper functioning of *van panchayats*. This work can be burdensome for a poor, ill-informed, and ill-equipped *van panchayat sarpanch*.

### Holding of Elections

Timely holding of elections demands the full involvement of the FPI. Because of the FPI's heavy work burden, however, elections are often either not held as per schedule or they are held in great haste. This mars the process of correct identification and selection of appropriate leaders. The election of the *van panchayat sarpanch* thus becomes a task of asking volunteers to undertake an unwanted job.

### **3.3.3 Management Problems**

#### Non-release of Share of Revenue

The *van panchayats* have a right to 40 per cent of the 90 per cent of income available for community development work. However the money is kept at the DM office level and is difficult to access. One study (Saxena 1987) revealed that in Almora district alone the total accumulation in the capital account of the *van panchayats* was Rs 12 million. Many *van panchayats* do have sufficient money in their account, but it remains unused as a result of lack of proper guidance and knowledge.

#### Non-release of Funds to the Forest Department

No funds are available in the *van panchayats* for the development of the *van panchayat* forests. This work is the responsibility of the FD, and the FD should get 40 per cent of the revenue for development for this responsibility. In practice, the FD rarely gets this share, and in reality the FD pays little attention to this additional responsibility.

#### Absence of Technical Knowledge

There is a total absence of technical knowledge of forestry among the *van panchayat sarpanches*, committee members, villagers, and even FPIs. This leads to apathy towards conservation measures, and thus deprives local landless people

and unemployed youths of employment opportunities in forestry activities carried out by the Forest Department. Work has started recently on converting the Forest Training Institute at Haldwani to a Forestry and *Van Panchayat* Training Institute. A 15-day course for *van panchayat sarpanchs* has started, and so far 356 *sarpanchs* have completed more than 69 such courses. However capacity building is necessary on a large scale not only for the *sarpanchs* but also for young people and women.

### Over-Burdened FPIs

There are only 14 FPIs in Uttarakhand to supervise about 5,000 *van panchayats*, which means that each has responsibility for about 400 *van panchayats*. Even if an FPI worked 365 days a year, they could not visit every *van panchayat* once.

### Financial Problems

In the case of disputes, non-payment of fines, or realisation of revenue, litigation has proved to be a burden for *van panchayats* as a result of financial constraints.

### **3.3.4 Other Common Problems**

#### Insufficient Authority for the *Van Panchayats*

The *Van Panchayat* Rules of 1976 do not give sufficient financial and administrative autonomy to the *sarpanch* or the committee. For example, Section 17 of the Rules requires prior approval of the Deputy Commissioner before a watchman or any paid staff can be hired by the *van panchayat*. An offence involving a sum of more than fifty rupees can be compounded only with the previous approval of the Deputy Commissioner. Similarly, permission is required for the auction of any seized property (for example, stolen timber). The *van panchayat*, on its own, cannot even sell surplus forest produce from the area to the rightholders for their domestic use without obtaining prior approval from DFOs. Even if trees exempted under the Tree Protection Act of 1976 are available for commercial sale, permission is required from both the Collector and the DFO, and action to mark and sell the trees can only be taken by the DFO.

The *van panchayat* can only sell fallen wood and grass for domestic use by the villagers, provided such sales do not violate the provisions of the working plan of the *van panchayat*, which is supposed to be prepared by the Forest Department.

#### Ecologically Poor Area of the *Panchayats*

A study conducted by Banerjee in Almora showed that the majority of *van panchayats* had areas of less than 50 hectares, and that these were not always compact but were scattered in different places. No forest can survive if it is continuously being used unless it is large enough to regenerate itself. This is the reason that villagers largely depend upon Reserve and Civil Forest for their day to day needs, while their own *panchayats* suffer from utter neglect.

#### Unrestricted Grazing

Overgrazing is prevalent in *van panchayat* areas as a result of financial problems, apathy, ignorance, the absence of watchmen, the absence of social fencing, and/or excessive numbers of cattle. The *sarpanch* and committee members often fail to close 20 per cent of the area to grazing as envisaged in Section 18 of the *Van Panchayat* Rules. In many instances, people from adjoining villages also graze their animals in the *van panchayat* area but the *van panchayat sarpanch* fails to check this in the absence of social fencing and watchers. Roadside *van panchayats* suffer, especially from excessive encroachment and biotic pressure.

#### Availability of Water

Most of the *van panchayats* have seen their water reduced as a result of the loss of forest cover, and water scarcity is a general problem. Villagers have to travel far to fetch water for their domestic needs. Forestry activities like the establishment of seedling nurseries cannot be undertaken, even if people are willing.

#### Problems of Oak *Panchayats*

*Van panchayats* that have predominately oak forests suffer from lack of funds because they



cannot extract resin, or dead and uprooted trees, like in pine forests. Although the forests are most important from an ecological point of view, these *van panchayats* suffer economically.

### 3.4 The Present Scenario

Notwithstanding the 66 years of existence of *van panchayats*, and the fact that the UP hill areas in one sense pioneered the introduction of community management of forests in India, community forestry in Uttarakhand has failed to evolve. There also appears to be a general lack of interest in local communities to promote it. Some of the reasons for this are discussed below.

- The gap between the demand and supply of forest products to meet the needs of the ever-increasing populations of both humans and cattle has resulted in fast depletion of forests. As forest products are not available in nearby forest areas, villagers have had to travel further to collect their products.
- The government considered that the objective of granting rights and concessions to forest products to local people was to enlist the cooperation of local communities in the protection of forests. But although people are conscious of their rights, they are indifferent to their duty to protect and manage the forests. The deteriorating law and order situation worsened the protection of forests.
- Lack of awareness amongst people of the intangible benefits from forests related to soil, water conservation, and ecological balance is another factor contributing to the lack of interest in forest management.
- Women and children mostly carry out the collection of firewood and fodder. A study done by a women's organisation showed that women's share in most household activities is higher than that of men (Table 3.6). While controlling excessive lopping and collection of fodder and grass are considered to be the duty of the Forest Department staff, imposition of fines on women and children, and confiscation of their tools have always been contentious issues with the communities. On the one hand villagers have to collect fodder and fuelwood, on the other the Forest Department staff must attempt to control overuse because of laws and the prescriptions of the forest working plans.
- Management of Civil Forests has suffered as a result of their ambiguous status. The change in legal status of Protected Forests to Civil Forests has not been able to protect the Civil Forest from overexploitation and unscientific harvesting. People have lost interest in their management with the loss of their productivity and utility. Depletion of the forest cover in Civil Forest areas has increased the pressure on Reserve Forests and *Panchayat* Forests. Areas are also being encroached on for non-forestry work.
- The rapid creation and development of a road network in the fifties and sixties, and slow but steady continuation thereafter, had a big impact on the social milieu of the hill people. Roads brought many new immigrants, and at the same time theft from forests for commercial purposes started as a result of the easy accessibility and openness of the forests and the very poorly equipped forest staff.

**Table 3.6: Women's Share in Household Work in Uttarakhand**

Work	by Women	by Men
Collection of fuel	91.73	8.27
Collection of fodder	99.01	0.99
Fetching water	83.38	16.62
General agricultural work	88.32	11.68
Collection of manure and manuring of the fields	80.59	19.41
Watching and warding of cattle	78.17	21.83
Plantation work	98.74	1.26
Cooking	98.20	1.80
Cleaning of fields (weeding)	98.92	1.08

Source: Uttara 1997

- The demand for forest products has increased many fold with the phenomenal rise in population, whereas the availability of forest products has decreased from the areas earmarked for supply for the villages. This has created a problem.
- In terms of quality, the *van panchayats*, which are supposed to sustain all the fodder and fuel requirements of a village, are today very poor. The density and quality of these forests and of Civil Forest areas are declining. Civil Forest areas are now generally totally bare with sporadic stands of trees. There are many *van panchayat* areas with good stocks of forest where the community is taking care to save them from over-exploitation, but these forests are being saved at the cost of nearby Reserve Forests because the villagers use these to collect forest products. Despite stringent laws, it has not been possible to protect Reserve Forest areas close to villages from degradation.
- In Uttarakhand the total number of inhabited villages is 15,166, but only 4,867 *van panchayats* have been created (Table 20). Of these *van panchayats*, less than 20 per cent are able to meet the needs of the community. As a result, Reserve Forests, for which villagers feel no sense of ownership, have been overused.
- A recent study by Banerjee of 30 randomly selected *van panchayats* in Kumaon and Garhwal revealed the following.
  - The villagers met more than 80 per cent of their fuel, fodder, grass, fallen leaves, and water demands from nearby Reserve or Civil Forests.
  - *Van panchayats* with an area of 150 hectares or more in a compact block and lying close to good Reserve Forests are relatively better protected and provide some services to the local community. *Van panchayats* with an area of 70 hectares or less, and/or which are scattered and further away from Reserve Forests, are degraded and do not provide much produce for the villagers. In some cases, women belonging to such *van panchayats* even travel by bus to collect products from distant Reserve or Civil Forests.
- Very few *van panchayats* have their own water resources. In many cases, they have always lacked such resources because of the very small size of forest area, but in some cases forest degradation may have had an impact on the water-retaining capacity of the forest. For example, as a result of the regular removal of non-timber yielding trees called '*kukat*', water sources have dried up in some areas. The water sources in the very few *van panchayats* that still have their own sources, have their origins in nearby Reserve Forests.
- A piece of forest only 60-70 hectares in size cannot retain much tree cover, especially if it is regularly used. A forest is a complex ecological unit which develops after many centuries of biotic and abiotic interactions. These give rise to the biodiversity, rich soil cover, and fresh water springs, that are a must for human survival. Small pieces of isolated forest cannot remain ecologically viable.

Despite having well-formulated laws and rules, the *van panchayats* have largely failed to achieve their objectives as a result of years of neglect, disuse, and apathy on the part of both the people and the government authorities. Degradation of *van panchayats* has encouraged people living in adjoining areas to gradually extend their cultivation onto the *panchayat* lands. *Van panchayats* also suffer heavily from unchecked mining and stone quarrying for construction, and many also suffer from illicit felling, poaching, and illegal tapping of resin. The basic difficulty in protecting *Panchayat* and Reserve Forests from fire and biotic pressures has been the lack of initiative on the part of both the communities and the Forest Department.

Community forestry in the UP hills in the shape of *van panchayats* provided a model for Joint Forest Management (JFM), which is now being discussed increasingly in all forums. There is increased realisation of the need to involve people in the care and share of forests at every possible

level. JFM rules were framed in 1997 with the aim of retaining the interest of stakeholders (villagers) by increasing the proportion of revenue accruing to village communities. Effective steps

should be taken to remove all the gaps in the *van panchayat* system and to strengthen *van panchayats* so that they can become capable and self-sufficient.