

Miles to Go



A recent women's gathering

With the opening of the Park to ecotourism, the Forest Department has taken the lead role in the Nanda Devi area. Although laudable, the approach fails to build upon the gains achieved from the struggle of the local people. During the course of the advocacy campaigns, a conscious effort was made to steer the debate on pro-conservation lines, but the post-opening phase has upset the momentum a little. The Bhotiya community, with its rich socio-cultural heritage, and the glorious history of the Chipko movement still needs to gain recognition as the prime stakeholders in an exemplary participatory ecotourism model.

The Nanda Devi people's campaign proposed an extended basic mountaineering training for the local youth at the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering, Uttarkashi, to enable the youngsters to become effective trekking and mountaineering guides and other service providers. There are dissenting voices, however. Griesbaum (2003) observed that promising young people a prosperous future and giving them minimal training will not improve their chances for a better life unless they are entitled to share the control of resources and the necessary human capital. Similarly, Bosak (2004) considers the success of community-based tourism to be crucial in both the conservation efforts and in safeguarding the livelihood rights of local communities.

A number of factors favour the Nanda Devi campaign, which indicates its potential to emerge as a role model for the Himalayas. Prominent among them is that there is local support for the sustainable management of natural resources. All the ingredients for making an amiable solution are available at the regional level. What is missing is the convergence of efforts. This can only be achieved by understanding

rural communities as intelligent living systems, and providing space for a level playing arena.

Postscript

The Nanda Devi campaign has made considerable progress in 2005/2006. As part of partially opening the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve to ecotourism and celebrating International Women's Day in March 2006, the campaign launched a five-years-in-the-making inaugural women's trek with a special invitation to the world's women to join this historic journey. The Devi Trail, as the trek is referred to, will take the inaugural women trekkers not only to breath-taking vistas, landscapes, and biological diversity near the Nanda Devi area, it will also involve them in visits to the villages and acquaint them with the stories and social movements of the region's unique trans-Himalayan peoples.

This is an example of the sort of path-breaking ecotourism model that the campaign has, over the years, worked towards. Starting from a simple email advertisement on the Mountain Forum, and later an invitation announced at the Nanda Devi campaign website, www.nandadeviprayaga.org, the invitation has received applications to participate from women across the globe. The selection process has been completed and seventeen applicants from students to doctors, journalists, and tour operators from places as diverse as Taiwan and India, Canada, USA, and Nepal, will participate. The women on this inaugural trek will also form part of the product development team which will help Mountain Shepherds, a company organised to promote community-based tourism in the Nanda Devi area, put together a commercial version of the Devi Trail. The women's trek also commemorates the 30th anniversary of Devi Unsoeld's untimely passing near the summit of Nanda Devi as part of an Indo-American expedition that ascended the difficult Northwest Face-North Buttress of the area for the first time in 1976. The daughter of legendary mountaineer Willi Unsoeld, 22-year-old Devi had harboured ambitions to climb her namesake, but she was struck by a fatal stomach ailment before the final ascent. Five years later, Rekha Sharma, Chandra Prabha Aitwal, and Harshwanti Bisht became the first women to successfully reach the mountain's summit.

Several other packages and interventions are in the pipeline. With support from the Winterline Foundation, a USA-based nonprofit organisation, the campaign is also organising a month-long training course in basic mountaineering for 40 unemployed young people of the area, to be selected in consultation with the gram sabhas of the villages around Nanda Devi. Training will commence in mid-August 2006 and will include, in addition to basic mountaineering, additional inputs on bio-cultural diversity conservation and catering to the special needs of senior citizens and the physically challenged. It will be conducted by the prestigious Nehru Institute of Mountaineering, in Uttarkashi. The trained young people will first work on probation with Mountain Shepherds, but on successful completion of their probationary period, will be offered partnership in the company. They will manage the inaugural Nanda Devi Women's Trek.

With these interventions the Nanda Devi campaign is poised to evolve into a operation that will test the boundaries of genuine community-based participatory ecotourism.