

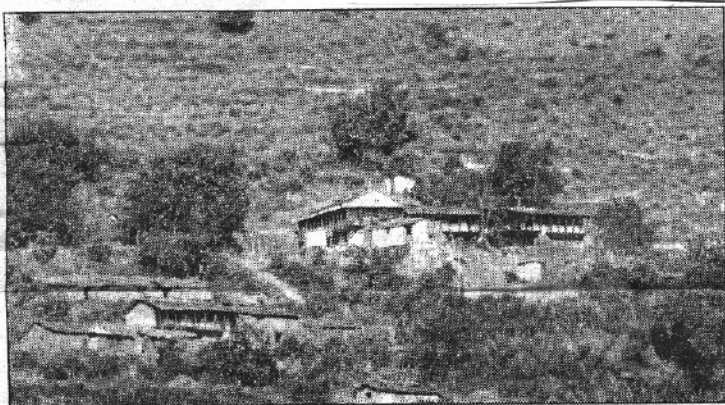
People Vs Policy in Nandadevi Biosphere Reserve

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The basic idea behind the Man and Biosphere (MAB) Programme of UNESCO is to improve the relationship between Man and Environment. The International Coordination Council of UNESCO in its first meeting in 1971 had first floated the idea of creation of Biosphere Reserves throughout the world and, so far, more than 356 Biospheres Reserves in 90 countries have been created. Out of the 13 Biosphere Reserves created in India, the Nandadevi Biosphere Reserve, named after the famous Nandadevi Peak, enjoys a distinct place. It is the second oldest Biosphere Reserve of India created in 1988 (after Nilgiri created in 1986) and the first one of the Himalayas.

A team was sent to Nandadevi Biosphere Reserve (NDBR) on the initiative of the then Uttaranchal Government (following the inception of the state) to suggest whether the



reserve should be opened for adventure tourism i.e. for activities like mountaineering and high altitude treks. With the mounting global pressure for biodiversity conservation and Nandadevi being a World Heritage Site since 1992, the chances of the Central Government responding positively to the initiative of the Uttaranchal Government were expected in advance to be quite meager. Yet, it brought into focus, once again, the poor quality of life and inner urge for economic development, rather than mere survival of over 8000 people inhabiting (then) 17 villages with their 2500 cattle in the 1612.12 sq.km. of buffer zone.

This reserve occupies a

special place in the Biosphere Reserve systems of high altitude Himalayan region of India. Its territory comprises unique combination of meadows, several high peaks and glaciers. The reserve covering an area of 2236.74 sq. km is located in the northern part of western Himalayas with a core zone of 624.62 sq. km and a buffer zone of 1612.12 sq. km.

On 7 February, 2000, the Government of India extended the total area of NDBR from the existing 2236.74 sq. km. to 5860.69 sq. km. by including the Valley of Flowers National Park as the second core zone and adjoining habitation zones as buffer zone. Before 2000, there

were only 17 villages in the buffer zone of NDBR. As many as 30 more villages, including the famous Badrinath shrine and Hemkund Sahib have been incorporated in the buffer zone area during the expansion of protected area. Thus, a total of 47 villages are now situated in the buffer zone of NDBR in the districts of Pithoragarh, Bageshwar, Chamoli, etc., of the Uttarakhand Himalayas. Four of these villages are presently uninhabited.

The topography of Nandadevi region kept it inviolate by man for centuries. The Nandadevi peak (7896 mtr) in the core zone (624.62 sq.km.), to which the region owes its name, is the second highest in India and access to it is barred by the surrounding peaks of Nandadevi East (7430 mtr) Nandakhat (6611mtr) Kalanka (6931 mtr) Mrigthuni (6855 mtr) Trishul (7720 mtr) and Rishipahar (6992 mtr). This rim of peaks is broken only by the Rishiganga river originating from the snows on the lofty shoulders of the Nandadevi. This area was first approached by well known English mountaineer Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman in 1934, who explored the Sage Route to Nandadevi peak and were probably the first to see the herds of blue sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*), locally called Bharal. It was declared a wild life sanctuary in 1939. The post independence era saw a host of mountaineers, trekkers, naturalists, and also poachers, entering the core zone of the sanctuary, ultimately effecting the imposition of a ban on entry into this region. By early eighties, this region was conferred the status of national park. On 18 January, 1988, taking a cue from the UNESCO's Man & Biosphere programme, Nandadevi National Park was given the status of

NDBR. About 400 tree species, 552 species of herbs and shrubs, 18 species of grass, 86 of mammals, 534 of birds and 54 of reptiles and amphibians are reported from NDBR. The reserve further covers a sub-catchment including a large number of glaciers feeding the tributaries of the river Ganga. Thus, besides being crucial from the point of view of bio-diversity, the biosphere is crucial for the hydrological balance of the Gangetic plains.

NDBR intends to fulfill three complementary functions i.e. conservation, development and logistic support for research and education. However, eagerly proselytising the concept of

conservation at the official level, the local inhabitants here have been deprived of their traditional rights over natural resources, ignoring completely their dependence on it for subsistence needs. Unless sustainability of natural resources

is addressed in their social, cultural and natural context, the biodiversity conservation may be in jeopardy. The infuriated dwellers of the buffer zone have for long been demanding that along with exploring the possibilities of reopening tourism activities in the reserve, the impact of reserve on their economy should also be studied. It will not be out of place to recall here that quite ironically in this region of

the world famous 'Chipko', a group of about 500 local inhabitants in 1998 staging a 'chheeno-jhapti andolan' entered the core zone with their cattle, without any proper permission. It indeed was a symbolic manifestation of the extent to which the people-policy conflict could reach. The reason for this antagonism on the part of the villagers may be attributed to a spontaneous though misplaced realisation that in the eyes of city-bred policy makers - 'busy siphoning funds from the World Bank' - trees, shrubs and wild animals are much more important than the lives of the humans also inhabiting the same region.

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Almost all the population of the buffer zone villages depends on the surrounding jungles for a variety of resources. In the traditional system, people were free to collect dead wood, leaf litter and a variety of non-timber forest produce (NTFPs) at any time. Fodder and medicinal plants were harvested in groups during fixed periods as decided by consensus of the village community. Alpine pastures located in the core zone are now denied access to the people in the name of conservation. Livestock holdings, especially those of sheep rearers, are declining fast. Pasture dwellings at Dharans and Dubrigarh, once owned by the inhabitants of Lata village have now been abandoned. This, in turn, has resulted in a reduction of wool production and wool based traditional handicrafts. Over 90% of the male youth of Reni, Lata, Tolma and Peng villages used to work as tour guides for expeditions to high peaks such as Nandadevi and Trishul till 1980.

A ban on tourism to the core zone has eliminated an important source of income for the people. Extensive researches by scientists of the Himalayan institute of Environment, Srinagar (Garhwal Hills) speak of a large number of livestock (a total of 875 heads in between 88-96) being killed by the wild animals. Crop damage by the wild life (ungulates, monkeys, wild bears, boars, etc.) has further affected the subsistence economy of the people. Dominant horticulture crops like apple and peach are also damaged to a great extent. The management plan of NDBR has a provision for compensation for such killings. However, the locals feel that it is quite difficult for them to get the claim settled quickly and fairly. Due to the entry restrictions in the reserve, routes to Malari and Milam passes have also been stopped resulting in a breakdown of matrimonial and trade relationship between the tribals of Niti & Johar valley in the higher reaches of Himalayas. The reserve management plan, turning

a blind eye towards these ground realities, lays more emphasis on legal protection than on the sustainable livelihood of the local community. The so-called alternatives provided by the biosphere reserve authorities to the local people are neither adequate nor acceptable to the locals.

The induced isolation thrust upon the people (mainly tribals); the indifference of government towards the worsening condition of the inhabitants in the changed economic scenario and the dualism in policies like allowing tourism in some national parks (Corbett National Park, for instance) but simply doing nothing for the buffer zone of NDBR, where the entry restriction is not there - are difficult to justify. The number of tourists visiting the buffer zone between 1982-till the turn of the century was just 440 (80% foreigners) and surprisingly the government on date has no proper plan to

promote home based eco-tourism in the economically impoverished villages of the region. Tourism already existing in the newly added second core zone (Valley of Flowers National Park) and the adjoining habitation zones (like Badrinath shrine, etc., now buffer zone) is being publicised in the name of eco-tourism by the officials. The biodiversity management plan shows that expenditure on facilities to protected area staff always has considerable edge on benefits to the local community.

Conservation drives in developing countries have always been controversial; especially when relegating the local inhabitants to the background. The ethics of conservation is designed and thrust at the official level. In Uttarakhand hills, where poverty in terms of cash (though not of resources) is quite rampant, it is somewhat difficult to ensure the success of a conservation drive without

taking the masses into confidence. Forests, water and land have always been integral parts of life in hills and without a thorough understanding - not only of the socio-economic scenario, but also the psyche of the hill people - it has never been easy for the policy makers to arrive at safe decisions. The Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve with a wide range of shades of settlements and topography gives us an opportunity to understand the life as it is in the interiors of hills. It further enables us to probe deep into the reasons, which despite the sanctity of purpose and sincerity on both sides - i.e.

policy makers on the one hand and the villagers on the other - is resulting in mutual mistrust and conflicts. It is interesting to note that even the history of the national movement in the hills was conditioned by the policy the British adopted towards Jungles.

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