

2001

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### Recommended Citation

Gaul, Karen K. (2001) "On the Move: Shifting Strategies in Environmental Activism in Chamba District of Himachal Pradesh," *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 21: No. 2, Article 12. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol21/iss2/12>

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# *On the Move: Shifting Strategies in Environmental Activism in Chamba District of Himachal Pradesh*

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## ABSTRACT

In Chamba District of Himachal Pradesh, some local residents have been dedicated to environmental education, forest, watershed and wildlife protection, and the building of sustainable villages on the *panchayat* level for many years. These activists do not rely on any single source of inspiration or support but employ situation-specific strategies. A simultaneous history of forest protection and regeneration schemes on the part of Forest Department and various development agencies has met with a variety of responses by local people. A great deal of mobility on the part of environmental activists, in terms of not only physical travel but also strategic dexterity, gives new meaning to the term social movement. Activists and local residents bring a critical perspective to Joint Forest Management and other government initiated programs in the area.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In Chamba District of Himachal Pradesh, social and environmental activists work at the village level to establish and protect the species-rich forests that provide wildlife habitat, contribute to the production of honey, fruit and other income-generating resources, stabilize slopes against erosion, and provide fodder and fuelwood for daily needs. They work on educating the young about wildlife protection, watershed management, and other environmental issues. These initiatives are undertaken sometimes completely independent of any government-sponsored forest development schemes and sometimes in full or partial cooperation with various government programs.

Activist leaders make decisions about when and under what conditions they will participate in government projects. Such strategies reflect underlying political, philosophical, and spiritual perspectives as well as the activists' regard for government institutions such as the Forest Department or Rural Development offices. Government sponsored programs, such as the past Social Forestry Program or the more recent Joint Forest Management initiative, are launched with or without cooperation from these activist leaders.

These social and environmental movements are multifaceted and flexible yet also stable and resilient. The constant restructuring of administrative systems, the frequency with which government employees are transferred from one position to the next and the continual introduction of new programs all contribute to a lack of continuity in government entities. Key local activists are constantly on the move as well—physically and intellectually. However, they tend to lend a degree of continuity in communities as waves of government programs and personnel flow in and out of the region.

The following discussion considers the shifting relationships between rural village leaders of grassroots environmental efforts and government sponsored programs. At the heart of activists' choices about participation are ongoing critiques of government entities and alternative visions for a decentralized people-centered approach to development based on village level self-governance at the *panchayat* level.

## Chamba District

The borders of Chamba District include some of the most mountainous regions in the state and stretch to the Lahoul and Spiti to the west, Jammu and Kashmir on the north, and Kangra District to the south and west. Chamba District includes a cross-section of the crumbling and gravelly Shivalik Hills and the steeper mid- to high ranges of the Dhaula Dhar and Pir Pangal ranges. Perhaps most re-

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<sup>1</sup> Research has been carried out in Chamba District over the last several years. Research funding has been provided by the Fulbright Foundation and the Smithsonian Institution.

markable is that people inhabit almost every imaginable part of this region.

Chamba town is the district center, nestled on an uncommon plateau above the Ravi River and surrounded by flowing wheat fields and occasional plantations of chir pine. Terraces built on steep and often rocky soils climb like unending staircases up hillsides. Small hamlets are sprinkled over this landscape.

Chamba town is in many senses a hub for those living in the surrounding hills, a destination for distant travelers, and the administrative center for surrounding areas of the district. Now home to about twenty thousand people, Chamba was formally first settled about the sixth century (Negi 1963, 1966; Hutchison 1904; Hutchison and Vogel 1933; Ohri 1989). Temples dating from eighth century, protected from destruction during violent overthrows in neighboring areas by the town's relatively sheltered location, are scattered throughout the town's architectural layers.

Slate-roofed buildings (supplied by slate quarried from surrounding hills), including shops, temples, and houses, crowd the plateau area and creep up the steep surrounding hills; winding roads in various stages of repair curve around hill contours. Additionally, trails that carry foot and animal traffic are carved into the mountainsides. This region is demographically comprised of a primarily Hindu population with some Muslims, Sikhs, and transhumant Gujjars and Gaddis. These groups intermingle in local markets that feature a combination of locally grown fruits, vegetables, and milk products as well as sodas, packaged foods, plastics, produce, and other supplies brought from the plains on large, noisy, and brightly painted orange lorries. Sewage and trash stream by in (or clog and flow over) open ditches on the sides of roads, eventually reaching the Ravi River.

In small hamlets or villages on the hills surrounding this town, women and men rise early to stall feed young goats, sheep, and cows. Women and older girls prepare breakfast and ready children for school. Very young village children usually walk some distance to a village level primary school, and high schools are often even farther. If they do not attend school, children will help take animals out for grazing on the slopes, cut and store grass, or work in the small terraced fields that produce a summer crop of maize and a winter crop of wheat. Only in a few lower areas, where the valley floor is near the river, can rice be successfully grown.

### Forest Use

Designated forestlands in the Western Himalaya consist of some small diameter trees and shrubs but are often open slopes with sparse vegetation. Despite this, forests of the Himalaya are heavily used, as villagers exercise their

right to forest resources in all but Reserve Forests. People graze animals, gather fuel and fodder, and live large portions of their lives on these slopes. Women weave mats, men spin wool, children study books or perform any number of tasks while herding sheep, goats, and/or cows.

The variety of ways in which people use forest materials is extraordinary (Malhotra 1992). For example, birch bark (*bhuji*) is laid out as a base under dung floors, sometimes used on ceilings like tar paper, and in the past was used as writing paper. Wild apricot trees provide fruit that is eaten fresh or dried and eaten as a salty snack, dead branches for firewood, oil from the seed which is used for earaches, and some building materials. *Goon* or Horse Chestnut trees are used for medicine to treat stomach problems in horses, washing powder, fodder, and nuts that are both eaten and used medicinally.

Besides the fairly predictable list of fuel, fodder, some food, and construction materials, people draw from the forest materials for shoe polish, skin and hair oil, fencing materials, and fibers for cloth, rope, and teeth cleaning. Particular kinds of wood are used for farm implements, cricket bats, furniture, ceilings, cross beams, doorframes, window trim, and fruit boxes. Materials for basket making and woven sitting mats are collected. Sheep, goats, cows, horses and water buffalo feed on a wide range of edibles. Olives, berries, fruit, and nuts are eaten fresh or made into chutneys or jams. Leaf dishes are used for big feasts such as weddings. Medicinal plants treat colds, coughs and fever, purify blood, and help increase memory.

The *peepul* (*Ficus religiosa*) is used for *puja* (worship) and offers shade. Flowers are appreciated for their beauty and lovely scent. Lovers go to the forests for private trysts. These latter uses reflect an intimate appreciation of the variety of things forests offer, including spiritual expression, rest, and physical pleasure. In a related survey of people's perceptions about forests in the Chamba area, Gupta and Pirta found that:

Not only did people know about the capacity of forests to meet their very mundane day to day needs, but they were also conscious as to how forests could help in creating a better environment and in serving the most vital needs of humanity by providing it with fresh air, water and by conserving proper agroclimatic conditions (1990).

Some people told me that while some plants had been available locally in the past, one would now have to travel to far reaches to find them. Many of these were medicinal herbs that have been subject to extensive illicit cutting and smuggling. One such respondent, a herbalist healer, had vast and detailed knowledges about countless medicinal herbs and their localities. He noted that some herbs he used now had to be purchased in the market.

Hill villagers exercise their rights to forest products as delineated in the Settlement Report of Chamba (Negi 1966).<sup>2</sup> They do so, however, in the face of increasing demand—on both the village level and from the larger town of Chamba—on the forest biomass. Long-term residents of the area remember many more trees on surrounding hills, fewer roads, and less traffic in decades past. Drawing resources from the area's diminishing forests has become increasingly difficult.

## Movement

The term "social movement" takes on multiple meanings in the hills of Himachal Pradesh. Social and environmental activism for people living in the rural hills of the Chamba District requires a tremendous amount of travel by foot, bus, or whatever transportation is available. Such movement is necessary for networking, education, and planning as well as for the actual hard work of maintaining nurseries, planting, and tending to hillsides in order to protect and regenerate their community forests. In addition to forest protection, community activist groups organize protests against the Chamera dam series on the Ravi River, address local solid waste and water pollution problems, sponsor environmental programs in local schools, and raise questions about the overall quality of life in an ever-more heavily populated and visited area.

One dynamic village leader is Rattan Chand. For many years, like his father, Rattan Chand served as *pradhan*, or leader, of the *panchayat*, in the small hill village of Jadera. Years of labor rights and environmental activism in his younger days shaped Rattan Chand into a radical village leader, with an intensity of vision and a fierceness of energy that leave most who know him in awe and admiration. As *pradhan* from 1985–1996, Rattan Chand undertook numerous projects to strengthen local commitment to building a sustainable community, including strengthening the village cooperative societies, setting up various income generating schemes such as bee-keeping for honey, a fish pond for fish breeding and harvesting, and sewing and spinning programs for women in local women's groups (*mahila mandals*). But it has also meant working incessantly on extremely steep terrain to slow erosion by building stone check dams and strategically planting species that can hold fast in the rocky soil. Through far-reaching efforts, Rattan has motivated the community to replant the steep slopes with a mix of species. This replanting will provide the habitat needed to sustain bees, birds, and other wildlife, as well as provide for the daily demands of grazing and fodder (in the form of cut hay or leafy branches)

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that not all people in rural hill areas can read. Many have never seen the Settlement Report, although they have some idea that certain use regulations exist.

for domestic sheep, goats, cows, and water buffalo. The steep hills around Jadera are a rare lush green, with langurs and rhesus monkeys leaping through the branches of a mixed species forest.

In order to keep communities motivated, Rattan Chand has held numerous educational camps, training sessions, public forums, and discussion sessions to address and listen to large numbers of men, women, and children who are the laboring residents of these hills. Additionally, he works with Block Development Officers, Deputy Commissioners, District Magistrates, and Forest Officers to coordinate his efforts on the *panchayat* level with broader district and state goals.

This work has meant that Rattan is unceasingly on the move. He might be found anywhere up and down the Jadera catchment area, in surrounding hill areas, in Chamba proper, or further afield in other regions of the state or neighboring states.

In recent years, Rattan and his family moved to the Sahoo orchard, approximately thirty kilometers from Jadera, up an adjoining catchment area. His continued commitments at Jadera have meant increased daily travel by foot, bus, or any local car or motorbike that will pick him up. His friends joke about Rattan-ji's uncanny ability to disappear as easily as he might show up—miles from where you would expect him.

Now, Rattan Chand is a member of the *jilla parishad*, a broader ranging district council that includes thirteen *panchayats*. This territory is much broader in scope, spanning hundreds of hectares and including dozens of villages, which dot the surrounding mountains. The new position requires many more meetings in Chamba town and in distant villages. Rattan Chand jokes about the hundreds of kilometers he may cover in a day or two and even admits to the difficulty of continuing with such intensity—"day and night, walking, walking"—yet he presses on.

Rattan Chand's life and work, as extraordinary as it is, is strongly emblematic of the efforts that take place on the grassroots level in other areas of Chamba District and the state of Himachal. His work revolves around forest resources and matters of daily livelihood for villagers, crisscrossing territories, administrative boundaries, and diverse interests. It means a great deal of negotiation with numerous parties, and above all, constant far-ranging and inherently vertical movement. His commitment to place is both intensely local and wide reaching. He lives with his family in one richly green and continually sculpted spot. His identity is tied to the villages of Sahoo and Jadera, the district of Chamba, and the state of Himachal; home is at once in the orchard and across the hills.

It is important to note that the institutions, individuals, and programs Rattan Chand interacts with are in many ways themselves in motion, in the sense that they are in constant

transition. Most government positions, for example, are held for relatively short periods of time, and frequent turnover of government employees is common. The Deputy Commissioner, Block Development Officer, or Conservator of Forests, with whom activists interact, may change from one year to the next. In some ways, such constant shifting of people in these positions may be beneficial in that a less sympathetic person might be replaced with one who has enthusiasm and ideas that are more consistent with local agendas. But in many other ways the revolving-door policy for administrative positions on the district and state level means a great deal of flux, which can lead to a sense of discontinuity that is disconcerting and exhausting. Constant shifts in personnel mean that Rattan Chand must re-explain his work, aims, and goals.

New programs are introduced almost as often as positions are replaced, adding to the constantly shifting nature of development in this area. National and international development programs are introduced locally on a regular basis, though often with little involvement of the local development agendas.

#### **Providing for village forest use: state level and NGO efforts**

The need to protect timber producing forests provided the impetus for the first Indian Forest Act of 1865. The need to protect and regenerate village-level forests for the provision of day-to-day material needs has also been long recognized. Providing for villagers who use the forests on a daily basis for grazing, fuelwood, and fodder was ostensibly one of the Forest Department's functions, though secondary to the overall goal of managing forests for the production of revenue. In the fifteen years that I have been conducting research in the Chamba area, quite a number of forest protection and regeneration projects have been implemented. The struggle to provide and protect village-level forests has led to a number of different initiatives.

When referring to either government or non-government organizations (NGOs), it is important to note that such entities consist of both institutional structures and a wide variety of individuals within them. In the case of the Forest Department, for example, individual employees, no matter where they fall in the ranks, may be conscientious, critical, or corruptible. They may come from villages or cities and may be from among a variety of social positions in terms of caste and class. This variety, as well as the shifting bureaucracy, forms these institutional structures.

A number of government forest initiatives over recent decades has drawn a variety of responses from non-governmental groups. In some cases, members of NGOs agree to participate under particular conditions, in others they embrace projects quite enthusiastically, and sometimes they opt to not participate at all. These diverse strategies keep

the NGOs dynamic and give them a sense of control over their relationships to governmental institutions. The internationally funded Social Forestry scheme of the late 1980s and early 1990s was one approach for providing for village level forest use.

#### **Social Forestry**

In 1956 K. M. Tiwari published a paper in the "Indian Forester" that outlined a detailed plan to plant trees in various wastelands, degraded lands, vacant strips along roads, canals, railway tracks, and in village common lands. But it was not until 1976, when the National Commission on Agriculture issued a detailed outline for implementing Social Forestry schemes, that these ideas began to be applied. The Social Forestry program included the following elements:

- Creation of woodlots in the village commonlands, government wastelands, and *panchayat* lands. . . .
- Planting of trees on road, canal and rail sides. . . .
- Afforestation of degraded government forests in the close vicinity of centres of habitation. . . .
- Planting of trees on and around agricultural fields, hedges, compounds and on marginal private lands [farm-or agro-forestry] (Birla Institute 1990: 17).

Customized Social Forestry plans were developed on a state-by-state basis, depending upon forestry practices and management already in place. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, international funding began to be provided, in rather large sums, for the implementation of these programs. Approximately fifty percent of the funding for these state plans—about Rs. 572 million (roughly \$20 million)—came from international funding. This funding was provisional, however, and renewable on a year by year basis.

Social Forestry started in Himachal in 1984, and was originally funded by the World Bank as well as USAID. That funding was provided for five years, and since 1989, extensions have been applied for every one to three years.

There were quite a number of different schemes under the general program of Social Forestry. Each had a fairly detailed administrative protocol, and included such projects as raising and distributing plants, water harvesting structures, private wasteland planting, rainfed community woodlots, rehabilitation of degraded forests, silvipasture, and fuel-saving devices.

Until 1990, Social Forestry plantations were completely run by the Forest Department. But from 1991 to 1993, *vansevak* programs were initiated and the people cared for plantations. The motto was *van lagao, rozy kamao*, or "plant a tree, get employment." This readjusted scheme was unique to Himachal and had been so successful that other states began to use it as a model.<sup>3</sup> The main objective was for the Forest Department to engage the "poorest

of the poor” in plantation growing and maintenance. People were ranked by economic status, and only the poorest were selected for this program.

While local Forest Department administrators supported the Social Forestry programs in the state, the administration of the programs in the field was in many cases faulty: careful records were not kept, interactions between villagers and forest officials was minimal, and social rifts developed. The reliance on external funding made the programs provisional and uncertain. Moreover, reliance on external funding to provide for people’s everyday needs, rather than comprehensively including it in state and national budgets, created further problems (although some state funding had been allotted for the Social Forestry schemes, programs could not continue without the international monies).

Criticism of the Social Forestry programs has arisen from a number of sides. Critiques of monocropping and the use of imported species such as the eucalyptus, are common (S.K. Roy 1986:1-3; see also National Social Forestry (Umbrella) Project 1988). Further, it is interesting that the Forest Department chose lands which were already barren and marginal: rail lines, road edges, field edges, or the fields themselves. In other words, Social Forestry programs were undertaken as long as they did not interfere with the Forest Department’s production and marketing of timber and other minor forest products. In addition, the Social Forestry programs were administered in a top-down manner, despite discourses about community participation. They were not accompanied by overall education schemes, nor did they draw from the local community’s ideas for change. The inequitable distribution of funds has led to competition, jealousies, and resentment among people rather than joint cooperation.

Social Forestry may be destined to last only seven years in Himachal, though it would be unfair to say that it was completely unsuccessful. People gained monetarily and perhaps appreciated attempts to protect young forests for the future community. But the massive amounts of money that were spent and the lack of coordination and collaboration between Forest Department personnel and villagers reflect missed opportunities.

Environmental activists in the state, who continue to work with very little outside funding, see such expenditure as unfortunate waste. Compared to a philosophy that views forests as integrated, species-rich sources of life, such as that held by members of the *Himalaya Bucchao Samiti* (Save the Himalaya organization), the Forest Department perspective seems deeply problematic and destined to foster chasms between ideals and reality. Many activists chose not to participate in this state-run program, opting instead, as Rattan Chand put it, to work on their own “social for-

estry.” One of the ways he, Kulbhushin Upmanyu, and others in the district chose to develop local community forest projects was through the “Greening of Himalaya” initiative.

### Greening of Himalaya

The Greening of Himalaya initiative, initiated in the early 1990s, was similar to the Social Forestry Program but on a smaller regional scale. This program provided funding from the National Wasteland Development Board for planting trees that were to be protected by local people, with its benefits going to participating families in the form of forest products. Environmental activists in Chamba district (who were otherwise not entirely enthusiastic about the Social Forestry project) decided to participate in the Greening of Himalaya project. Rattan Chand and Kulbhushin Upmanyu—then each *pradhans* in their local *panchayats*—led the initiatives in the villages of Jadera and Kamla. Despite debates among members of various social and environmental organizations about accepting government funding, the Chamba activists felt the Greening of Himalaya project would be a good demonstration of a creative application of relatively small funds, and relatively large participation rates of communities involved.

The project was to last three years, fashioned and managed by the *pradhan* and villagers. As with the Social Forestry *vansavak* program, sections of wastelands and village common lands were selected, fenced off, planted, and protected by local *chowkidars*. However, decisions were made on the village level in the Greening of Himalaya program. Species selected included broad-leaf trees and shrubs that provided fodder, fruit and nuts, branches for fuel, pollen for honeybees, and nesting for many birds and wildlife. Highly eroded and degraded slopes soon became thick and richly green with young growth, and the leaders of the project boasted very high survival rates for saplings. They compared the relatively low expenses for upkeep, the survival rate of saplings, and the species diversity to Forest Department (Social Forestry) plantations which, according to them, did not have such high survival rates, cost more to maintain, and usually included only a few species, including the fast growing but not very useful chir pine (*pinus longifolia*).

However, while in the midst of the project in the early 1990s, funds promised for the payment of *chowkidars* and for the planting of additional demarcated wasteland areas did not come through from the National Wasteland Development Board. Although people on the village level—particularly in Jadera and Kamla—had worked tirelessly to gain the participation of local villagers, the full potential of this program was not realized without the NWDB following through. Local leaders continued with the project as much as possible given the limited funding, but the frus-

<sup>3</sup> Based on interviews with the then Social Forestry DFO.

tration was palpable and well warranted as one could easily see the second and third year growth of some of the saplings, and the literal "greening" of previously barren and badly eroded slopes. The *pradhans* in these two villages refused to take money for themselves for the Greening of Himalaya scheme, often spending money out of their own pockets for bus fares and other expenses. "We wanted to show them that money was not at all our concern. The priority was the work of planting." But they feared such statements were lost on the National Wasteland Development Board.

### **Watershed Management on the block level**

More recently, these same leaders have agreed to help raise interest in Watershed Management on the Block level. They are clear that they are not implementing a government program (this time from the Rural Development office); such an arrangement would set them up as an arm of the government, which they are not interested in doing. Instead they clearly see their role as limited to running training camps that motivate participants from all over the region to participate in their own villages.

Rattan Chand extended some of the Watershed Management resources to create stellar demonstration projects near the village of Sahoo. New terraces were built for a large nursery, and a community meeting house was erected where a small library is being developed and various workshops and educational sessions are held. Additionally, local people have replanted steep hillsides as in Jadera, just over the hill. In Kamla village, Kulbhushin Upmanyu continues with similar work.

In addition to these forest development initiatives in Chamba, a number of other programs overlapped in the 1980s and 1990s. The Norwegian Development Agency, NORAD, had chosen Chamba district as one in which it would deploy efforts to clean up solid wastes, promote ecotourism in the nearby Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary, and beautify the town and surrounding environs of Chamba.

In the early 1990s, a national literacy campaign (Gyan Vigyan Samiti) was launched throughout the country, in which people from all walks of life might help teach others basic Hindi. The goal was total literacy for the entire country. Social and environmental activists of the Chamba area chose to participate in the literacy campaign, and combined some environmental lessons with basic literacy.

Although local activists chose to participate in some limited capacity in the Greening of Himalaya initiative, the Watershed Management program, and other development programs, they are not so optimistic about the Joint Forest Management program.

### **Joint Forest Management**

Although Joint Forest Management (JFM) programs have been initiated throughout India, the Forest Department formally introduced them in Chamba District of Himachal Pradesh only recently. JFM is based on a model developed in West Bengal over twenty years ago, in which local communities and Forest Department staff worked together to protect and regenerate forests, and shared profits from forest production (Malhotra and Poffenberger 1989).

In the 1988 revision of National Forest Policy, emphasis was placed on the need for people's participation in the development and protection of forests. A memo from the Ministry of Environment and Forests in 1990 renewed its dedication to involving villagers in this process and delineated ways to involve NGOs (Government of India, June 1990 memo). In the early 1990s, pilot JFM programs were starting up in Kulu and Mandi districts. These were largely the result of a few individuals, working from within and outside of the Forest Department, who had learned about JFM and wanted to experiment with it. Ten years later, after twenty-two states had begun implementing JFM schemes, the Ministry of Environment and Forests renewed its dedication to this process and offered further guidelines for strengthening JFM throughout the country. In 1998 Himachal Pradesh formally took up the mandate on a state-wide basis.

The basis for JFM lies in the formation of Village Forest Development Societies (VFDS), at the local level. These Village Societies encourage membership from each family, emphasizing inclusion of traditionally more marginal members of the community such as women and graziers. The VFDS is meant to work closely with the *panchayat*, and executive committee and officers are to be elected. Importantly, a Forest Department employee of the area is to oversee management of funds. Various incentives such as new road construction or development of pastures and ponds are offered in the initial stages as incentive to encourage village participation.

Members draw up a micro-plan specific to their particular area and work closely with the Forest Department. Once underway, the VFDS members can gather fallen branches, grass, leaves, and other non-timber forest products. In addition, they are entitled to fifty percent of the proceeds from forest harvest, with some percentage to go into the VFDS account and some to be distributed directly to the members.

Discussions with various Forest Department personnel both in Chamba District and in State offices in Shimla in 2000 reflected a stronger emphasis on people's participation than I had heard in years past. They spoke of a very deliberate paradigm shift, and many were forthright in confessing that the Forest Department of the past had made

mistakes and had perhaps not managed forests as well as it could have. Many Forest Department personnel, as well as local residents, see a certain irony in this government-sponsored, people-centered scheme.

While there is a fair amount of enthusiasm for these JFM schemes across Chamba District, there are also critiques from within the Forest Department, from environmental activists in the area, and from other residents. The new language of people's participation is encouraging, but it is not entirely new. Critics of the JFM initiative note that if people were to be completely empowered in this scheme, they would have autonomy over creating and implementing the micro-plan, including financial management. They see the requirement for a Forest Guard to hold the position of secretary in the VFDS (although this is purportedly provisional) as a fundamental lack of trust. Suspicions about corruption and mishandling of funds run deep on both sides. Moreover, some critics (within and outside of the Forest Department) see the "entry point activities"—those efforts to gain peoples' interest by offering incentives such as new roads and schools—as little more than bribes. Would people not be interested in forest protection and gaining from forest profits without such incentives? As with Social Forestry before it, this version of JFM seems to emphasize a monetary award for participating, rather than a philosophical and practical desire to maintain healthy forests. Where will people's motivation be when funding runs out? Some may hope that forest profit is high enough to keep people interested.

Furthermore, the overall profit motive in the scheme is problematic as well. Rather than viewing the forest as a rich environment where humans live as one species among many others, commodification of forest products leads to a perspective that fosters exploitation. Despite the talk of people's participation and empowerment, many see this incarnation of JFM as a fundamentally top-down approach rather than the grassroots approach of the early years in West Bengal.

The institutionalization and commercialization of the JFM effort could be seen as celebratory or disheartening. The proliferation of T-shirts, books, glossy reports, and so on could be seen as a wonderful victory for the JFM movement, or as the worst possible outcome. The consumption of massive amounts of resources, in the name of JFM, may not be the best way to direct a people-led movement toward forest protection.

Critics of gender inequality in India and in many other development projects see JFM as not sufficiently addressing particular concerns and needs of women. Greater access to fuelwood, for example, does not address women's longer working days, greater exposure to woodsmoke in cooking, and other inequalities. Simply requiring women to be members of the VFDS is not enough. As many people

know, in similar membership requirements for *panchayat* level leadership, women are often members in name only<sup>4</sup>.

One glaring critique of the JFM initiative comes from a Forest Department administrator. He notes that people already have rights to forest resources; offering them access to forest products as an incentive seems somewhat redundant.

### NGOs and Informal Activism

Social and environmental activists in the state of Himachal (as is detailed in other articles in this issue) are a creative and dynamic lot. Any one person may be a member of several different, sometimes overlapping, movements. In Chamba, people gather at the *panchayat* level in rural villages, and in towns as concerned groups over particular environmental issues. Sometimes these activities are proactive, addressing work necessary for building strong forests and sustainable villages. At other times, activities arise in response to particular problems such as the series of multiple dams on the Ravi River with the Chamera dam project, or erosion caused by new roads on steep hillsides.

Such movements or issue-driven groups do not always identify themselves as formal NGOs or register as a formal society. Certainly a range of groups do identify themselves as NGOs. Some Chamba activists (and in Himachal in general) are critical of those NGOs that they see as angling for funding (where vision follows funding instead of vice versa) or serving as extensions of government entities.

For decades, rural forest communities have been fighting to maintain their rights and to strengthen their position in the management of diminishing forests (Guha 1990; Guha and Gadgil 1992). In Chamba these activities have taken many forms over the years. On a broader, inter-mountain level, many of the activists in the state are members of the Chipko movement, which has its nucleus in Uttar Pradesh. Chipko has served to help strengthen alliances across the Himalaya, with numerous groups formed and reformed under the umbrella of or in connection with the Chipko agenda. Ten years ago the Himalaya Bucchao Samiti (Save the Himalaya Organization) was formed, and more recently, activists have joined through a flexible alliance called Navrachna, centered in Palampur. Whatever the organization or initiative at hand, local activists in Chamba and in other areas of the state of Himachal are remarkably connected to one another. The various organizers develop strategies on particular issues, coming together or working separately as it suits them.

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<sup>4</sup> I know of an instance in one *panchayat* where the *pradhan* is officially a woman, though her husband runs the meetings and does all of the work of the *pradhan*. She laughs and says she knows nothing about it.



For activists in Chamba, human-environment interactions must be understood on a holistic basis. They see the environmental work as inherently tied to political and social justice, as well as their spiritual and philosophical perspective. They speak about the interconnection between species and the need to respect all life. They decry the commodification of any part of nature. These perspectives have been, for the most part, widely divergent from the management based approach of the Forest Department and other government bodies that implement programs focusing on people, forests, and wildlife. However, some of this now appears to be changing with recent paradigm shifts in Forest Department and Development agencies.

### **Conclusion: Shifting and strategic NGO/Government relations**

NGOs are often seen in opposition to state and national government bodies. In many cases there is good reason for such relations. NGOs have traditionally stood for local rights in the face of the apparent indifference of government agencies. NGOs serve as watchdog groups as well as bodies for mobilizing action and implementing particular schemes—often to supplement and fill in where government bodies leave off. But not all NGOs are alike.

Opposition is not the only way activists in Himachal Pradesh—and in Chamba—position themselves in relation to government bodies. These groups pick particular opportunities to cooperate and coordinate with government backed projects, but only under specific conditions. Kulbushin Upmanyu told me that some NGOs work in collaboration with the government and end up serving as instruments of the government, adding yet another layer of the government structure. To Upmanyu-ji, this is doubly problematic. First, the government structure does not see the need to fundamentally change to meet the needs of the people. By using NGOs to help implement their programs, the government gets off easy, especially in cases where the program has been unsuccessful. Second, though perhaps flattered and encouraged by government recognition at first, NGOs are not able to initiate and deploy their own strategies. Reinvention of themselves to meet specific needs at particular times is a reactive, rather than a proactive, way to operate.

These individuals and their flexible alliances are unique in that they can choose when and how they interact with government programs: cooperating, assisting, opposing, or ignoring as they choose. According to Upmanyu-ji, the possibility of strengthening a sense of empowerment and true democratic processes on the village level or chipping away at the large and sluggish “machine” of government structure is what motivates them to cooperate. If they see opportunity to transform a government body with a project, they would agree to participate. Upmanyu-ji feels that such

departments become complacent and ineffective when farming out the work of implementation to NGOs. Joint Forest Management, despite the emphasis on the participation by local people, may be too encumbered by the accoutrements of the “machine” of government to succeed any more than Social Forestry.

The social and environmental activists in Chamba sit in an uneasy juxtaposition to the turnover in government staffing and the steady stream of new programs introduced into these hill communities. The mobility of social movements—in terms of physical travel as well as strategic planning—keeps them dynamic and proactive. At times collaborating with government programs seems a smart option, and at others it does not.

The most heartening aspects of social movement work, not only in the Chamba District but across the state, are the creativity and diligence of its practitioners. Their concern for the people and environment of Himachal’s stunning mountainous terrain is ever-changing and situation specific yet deeply rooted in commitment to this place.

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