

The Search for Sustainable Development in the Himalayas

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The Search for Sustainable Development in the Himalayas

An Interview with Environmentalist Raghbir Singh Pirta



FIGURE 1 Raghbir Singh Pirta at the top of Kugar Peak, which rises to a height of about 3600 m in front of his village. The peak is adorned with signs of the villagers' reverence for mountains. (Photo by B. S. Pirta)

Chetan Singh (MRD): Dr Pirta, you are a psychologist by profession. How were you drawn into environmental activism?

R. S. Pirta: As I reflect upon it now, two factors seemed to propel me towards it. One was my emotional attachment to the Himalayas. I was born in a tiny Himalayan village near Shimla and still live there in a joint family arrangement. The second was the 4 years I spent in the Dehra Dun forest in the Himalayan foothills, researching the socioecology of monkeys. During this period, I saw the lives of both monkeys and humans closely affected by the forest habitat. Interestingly, it was during this time (1973–1977) that the Chipko Movement (tree “hugging” to save trees from the contractor’s ax) was spreading among the hill peasants.

You come from a rural area where peasants have prospered by growing cash crops such as apples and potatoes. Yet you are skeptical about this development. Why?

Today, my state, Himachal Pradesh, which is located in the western Himalayas, is famous as the “Apple State” of India. I know it is difficult to disagree with the frequent observation that apples and potatoes have revolutionized the economy of the hills. But the relationship is not quite so simple. The cost of subsidizing the production of apples and potatoes and the damage caused to the fragile ecosystem are overlooked. Technological know-how and subsidies provided by the state have prompted farmers to adopt this lucrative agricultural enterprise, but the common farmer has no idea where the subsidies come from. Moreover, due to widespread cultivation of apples and potatoes, precious local knowledge about traditional crops is fast disappearing. To make matters worse, the state has encouraged people to take up *nautors* (breaking up of new land, often virgin forest) for cultivation.

But the lure of timber is the major cause of forest decline. In January 1977

already, Dr Y. S. Parmar, the first Chief Minister and grand architect of Himachal Pradesh, warned, “It is a pity that we have not been able to implement our National Forest Policy with any semblance of effectiveness in maintaining about two-thirds of the area in hills under forest cover to secure the objective prescribed in the Forest Policy. On the contrary, the menace of deforestation has actually increased.” Shortly afterwards, he was unceremoniously ousted by the forces that later coined the slogan *kato aur kamao* (fell the trees and become rich) in Himachal Pradesh.

How do you perceive the shrinking green cover of the Himalayas?

We have two images of the Himalayas. One is derived from mythology and the popular imagination, according to which the Himalayas are seen as mighty and stable mountains. The other image is of a fragile mountain system; this is derived from our actual observations of landslides, erosion, and earthquakes in the region. These contradictory images notwithstanding, hill people have learned over the centuries that tree cover protects fragile mountains. Some environmentalists regard this as a myth. But we need to believe in this “myth” to save the Himalayas.

Mountain people are particularly dependent on forest resources. Here again there is a dilemma. The government wants to earn revenue by selling the *dead* produce of the forest (ie, timber), while native wisdom tells us to take only what comes naturally from *living* trees. Unfortunately, encroachment on forested land is continuing, not all of it prompted by economic necessity. It hurts me deeply to see how apathetic villagers have become about forest destruction. In many areas, they have caused considerable damage to flora and fauna.

The forest and so-called “wasteland” provide nontimber resources, which are the mainstay of the Himalayan village economy. “Wasteland” is a colonial misnomer for land between forests and culti-

vated areas around villages. You, Dr Chetan, have aptly used the term “intermediate spaces” of wealth instead of “wastelands” in your book *Natural Premises*. Traditionally, these spaces included village commons (*shamlat*), grazing lands (*chugan*), protected grass lots (*ghasnis*), and even sacred groves.

What role has the government forest department played in the economy of a Himalayan state such as Himachal Pradesh?

There has been a huge increase in the revenue generated in Himachal Pradesh by the forest department in the last 25 years. Revenues increased from a mere 25 million to 1450 million rupees. However, this is a short-term gain. The true value of the forests lies elsewhere.

In the 1970s, hill women in the Garhwal Himalayas were asked, “What does the forest produce?” Their unexpected reply was, “The forest produces soil, water, and pure air.” During the 1970s and 1980s, Chipko activists spread this traditional and rustic wisdom, reaching out across the Himalayas—from Kashmir in the west to Kohima in the east. As a result of this movement, the government of India declared a moratorium on commercial felling in 1983. But this has failed to keep out unscrupulous timber contractors, who continue to operate through the state Forest Corporations, which are public undertakings approved by the forest department for the extraction and sale of forest produce, especially timber.

What do you consider a proper scientific approach to these issues?

Let me add quickly that even the Planning Commission of India is pressuring the small hill state to generate revenue from timber. This is in direct contradiction of the 20-year development plan outlined in *INDIA 2020: A Vision for the New Millennium*, by A. P. J. Abdul Kalam,

one of India’s leading scientists. While he seeks to catalogue and protect biodiversity, the political leadership of the Himalayan states is busy destroying the unique natural heritage of the mountains.

Our ancient knowledge about medicines derived from plants dates back to the Vedic period around 1500 BC. Himalayan flora have been a major source of medicinal plants. Silvicultural practices are not conducive to the preservation of this unique biodiversity. Therefore, the forest department must change its present practice of extracting timber and make a more serious commitment to preservation and enrichment of the diversity of plant and animal life.

You are also actively involved with the Save Himalaya Movement and have continued to oppose the construction of big dams. What do you think is the best use of the natural resources of the Himalayas?

Any project that adversely affects Himalayan water resources is unsuitable. From this perspective, big dams, extensive mining, as well as the large-scale deployment of the army in high mountains such as the Himalayas, are ecological threats. For us, big dams are devils that devour indigenous people and their land. But water is also a major produce of the Himalayas to which everybody on earth has a right. The hill people can be the saviors of Himalayan water resources. In return, they must be treated with respect and not be economically compelled to abandon their homes in the hills to search for a livelihood elsewhere.

Water—the basis of life—is closely associated with the forest. Mythology further strengthens our psychological association with rivers. But this reverence for water must translate into practical policy. Piped water, subsidized by the government, has reached some of the remotest villages in Himachal. Yet there is apprehension about the economic sustainability of such schemes and a fear that depleting forest cover may cause springs to dry up.

“We have adopted a value system that views nature as a commodity and uses science to plunder its green treasure.... We have yet to move from the age of silviculture to the age of biodiversity.”

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FIGURE 2 The Jagra festival in Dakahar, with the procession to the *bawari* (water body) for the ritual bathing of Shari ra Deo, a local deity. (Photo by R. S. Pirta)

“I find it disturbing that a country with the basic community structure to preserve village forests and sacred groves sends its forest officers to England to learn about social forestry.”

Afforestation programs have always been accorded priority in the state development agenda. Yet the government has failed consistently on this account. Why?

Despite huge government spending, forest cover has been shrinking rapidly; it has increased only in government files. Conflicts also exist between the people and the forest department over which tree species really need to be planted. Chipko has strongly advocated and encouraged tree farming in the Himalayas. Its slogan of the five ‘F’ trees is now very popular among the masses—trees that give fuel, food, fodder, fertilizer, and fiber. On the other hand, the forest department has long emphasized monocultures of chir pine, poplar, and eucalyptus. The solution to this conflict therefore lies in gaining the cooperation of the people rather than excluding them from the forests.

You have conceded that villagers have neglected “intermediate spaces” and some even have a vested interest in the recent permission given for the green felling of trees. Do you still think that eliciting the cooperation of villagers is a feasible method for preserving forests and promoting afforestation programs?

I consider the alienation of people from the forest to be the result of a psycho-his-

torical process. It is amazing that the colonial legacy of forest management should come to be regarded as a scientific method! The colonial administrators had to replenish a shrinking natural resource base. The *science of silviculture* was employed to satisfy their insatiable hunger and choose the best timber lots in India. Once the money started trickling into the empty coffers of petty hill chiefs, in whose territories some of the best forests were situated, timber extraction became a mutually beneficial activity. Imagine how advantageous it was for the poor masses used to doing *begar* (forced and often unpaid labor) for the *raja*! Peasants, working as forest laborers, now received handsome wages from contractors. But this also triggered a fatal learning process and led to the decline of the conservation ethic. The alienation process started around 1850 and continues today. We have adopted a value system that views nature as a commodity and uses science to plunder its green treasure.

A few conscientious forest officers have taken alternative paths. In a spontaneous move in 1970, A. K. Banerjee, a forest officer, gained the confidence of villagers in protecting the Arabari forest in West Bengal. The initially reluctant local community agreed to his proposal when they were promised a share in forest produce. Thus emerged the idea of joint forest planning and management. However, experts cite three major impediments to its success throughout India. These are a reluctance to bring about a paradigm shift from state ownership to village ownership of forests, the focus on timber as the major forest product in forest working plans, and the tragic neglect of the socioecological point of view.

You have been associated with Gandhians such as Sunderlal Bahuguna for more than two decades. What future do you see for a development policy based on the Gandhian way of life?

Sunderlal Bahuguna can transcend from being an ordinary social worker to a high



FIGURE 3 Activists pause at a women's *ashram* near Karnprayag while spreading the message of the Save Himalaya Movement. These young women are rehearsing *Ganga Stuti*, verses in praise of the river, with Sunderlal Bahuguna. *Ganga Stuti* was written by the poet Ghanshyam Sallani, whose songs spread the Chipko Movement among the masses. (Photo by R. S. Pirta)

level of spirituality. As a keen observer of mundane grassroots problems, he can relate to complex global issues. One can find the latest issues of journals like the *Ecologist*, *National Geographic*, and *Mountain Research and Development* in his backpack. From a small hut, the *Ganga Himalaya Kuti* at the Tehri Dam site, Bahuguna is drawing the attention of the world community to a faulty developmental paradigm.

India needs to assimilate the Gandhian and Nehruvian visions of development and find a middle path. In this endeavor, we cannot overlook the social inequalities confronting us. We must take action to remove these inequalities. I agree with the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen that the central issue is to expand the social opportunities available to people. The nomadic Gujjar, the transhumant Kinnaura or Gaddi, and the market-savvy orchard keeper in Himachal Pradesh all depend in equal measure on the forest for survival. Any policy decision that reduces the availability of social opportunities is a threat to congenial social, political, and economic life in this state. It will be a challenging task to develop new technologies that enlarge the capabilities of individuals, empower people, and are compatible with the use of nontimber forest products.

So you would emphasize the crucial role that local communities need to play in maintaining an ecologically sound and sustainable lifestyle?

As a psychologist, I strongly believe that observational learning is an important paradigm for modifying the relationship between attitude and behavior. When groups of villagers go into the forests and alpine pastures to collect medicinal herbs, eg, observational learning takes place naturally. Individuals internalize communally observed social constraints, thus avoiding the “tragedy of the commons.” A villager in the remote mountains is virtually a live encyclopedia of biodiversity!

In the Himalayas, we hope to keep our ancient *aranya sanskriti* (forest culture) alive. The intrinsic value of flora and fauna is important to villagers. Mountains and forests are the abode of numerous gods and goddesses that share the joys and sorrows of the hill people. For hill women, the forest provides refuge from the mundane burdens of life: a place of freedom. These perspectives must pave the way for a policy of development in the Himalayas based on the quality of life.

“We have yet to move from the age of silviculture to the age of biodiversity.”

Dr Raghubir Singh Pirta, an associate professor at Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla, is a psychologist with a special interest in primate behavior and conservation. His field studies on the socioecology of monkeys have led to new discoveries about monkeys living in urban groups. He is active in the Save Himalaya Movement and is a strong advocate of supervision and care of natural resources by local villages. He also plans and coordinates refresher courses on the environment for university and college teachers in India.

Dr Chetan Singh is a historian at Himachal Pradesh University, specializing in the relationship between ecology and society, particularly in the Western Himalayas. His interview with Raghubir Singh Pirta took place on 25 September 2000. *Ed.*