Dissecting a Himalayan disaster, finding pathways

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Introduction

The massive climate-triggered disaster in Uttarakhand (and parts of Himachal Pradesh) in June 2013 is categorised as one of the biggest climate-related disasters in India’s recorded history. The four worst affected districts of Pithoragarh, Chamoli, Rudraprayag and Uttarkashi were devastated in all respects. The economy of the entire state, which depended upon tourism for nearly a quarter of its GDP and a large part of employment, also collapsed for a few months, making any recovery response that much more difficult. Large amounts of agricultural and forest lands were washed away and nearly 15,000 kilometres of roads were damaged. Skewed government and media priorities focused most attention on the richer tourist population that got stranded, while nearly 4 million affected local residents received little attention. Additionally, the devastation and massive human lives lost in the Mandakini valley (Kedarnath area) drew government and NGO resources to that area, while other affected areas languished. This was the context when the authors made preliminary visits to the Uttarkashi district to understand the impact of the disaster and community concerns.

This chapter examines how the 2013 disaster in Uttarakhand has affected the lives of the affected communities and seeks to understand community responses, while locating these within their natural and social contexts. The chapter describes the nature of the interventions undertaken in the disaster-affected villages, with implications for social and environmental justice, in accordance with the principles of the green social work model. Focusing on the impacts of the disaster and the initiatives undertaken in 20 villages of Uttarkashi, this chapter raises important concerns and related to sustainability of natural resource-based livelihoods, disaster preparations and forest rights, suggesting a strong reliance on local governance structures and community participation. Green social work supports advocacy for forest rights, sustainable use of the lands discussed in this chapter and the promotion of community resilience after disasters as advocated by Dominelli (2012).

Demographic, socio-economic and cultural conditions

The approximately 8000 square kilometres of Uttarkashi district has about 400,000 people, giving a population density of 50 persons/per Km². This is significantly fragile by mountain
standards. The entire upper Bhagirathi valley comprises of deep valleys, fast flowing rivers and steep forested mountain slopes, with snow covered peaks and ridges nearby. It is dominated by temples and religious places and depends for total income and employment opportunities largely on religion, adventure (to a lesser extent) and nature tourism. Three large hydro-electricity projects under construction on the Bhagirathi river in this area were halted in 2010 when the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF, n.d.) served an Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) notice. The declaration of the 135-kilometre stretch from Uttarkashi to Gaumukh as ESZ has curtailed any industrial activity, severely limiting local employment opportunities. This has created high levels of resentment in more than 85 villages and small towns in the region, but no significant alternative arrangement(s) have been attempted by government at different levels. However, the state government with the active support of both main political parties (the Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party) is now actively seeking to restart hydro-electricity projects in this fragile belt and proactively encouraging people to protest the ESZ notification and demand that it be scrapped.

The social structure is heavily influenced by the caste system, giving caste norms and networks a strong hold over communities. The population is mostly Hindu, with upper castes numerically dominant. A small minority of Muslims and migratory buffalo-rearing Gujjar populations also live there. A large part of the population is deeply religious and patriarchy rules with women often not getting a share in property (land or houses) or decision-making, while undertaking a major share of work on the farms and at home. There is a small growing migrant Nepali population and migrant workers from other Indian states. Along with the phenomenon of out-migration from mountain villages, this in-coming ‘foreign’ population is settling in several less accessible and remote areas, and sometimes causes tensions locally. Primary incomes among higher altitude villages stem from horticulture (apples) and tourism while the lower altitude villages have economic activities tied to budget-tourism along with the cultivation of cash crops – potatoes, kidney beans and vegetables. Although poverty is not as acute as in some eastern states, people are not secure in their incomes primarily due to the uncertainties and unpredictability of the weather and climate. Almost everything can get disrupted, even destroyed with a particularly bad climatic event, as has happened repeatedly at an increasing frequency over the past two decades. This possibility has induced a trend of people abandoning their mountain villages and settling in lower altitude towns at the first available opportunity. Nonetheless, among the registered population, 90 per cent remains rural. As the private/agricultural land holding is extremely small, measured in Nalis (about 240 square yards or 1/20th of an acre), people are mostly subsistence farmers, except in the upper reaches where apple growing is a big source of livelihoods. Sheep and goat rearing and their by-products provide supplementary incomes.

The work with village communities is important in the light of preliminary assessments (Adusumalli et al., 2013) that showed a clear tendency of the government to focus on rescuing stranded pilgrim tourists. A major question remained as to what happened to the village communities. Based on visits to the village communities of Gajoli (Assiganga area), Bhatwari, Sainj and Malla near Bhatwari Block Headquarters and of eight border villages near Gangotri in the Upla Taksore area, we initiated work using participatory assessments to focus on livelihoods, food security and disaster preparedness as indicated in the green social work model (Dominelli, 2012). Twenty villages became the focus of three clusters – Bhatwari, Assiganga and Border villages. The selected villages in the Bhatwari cluster, Bhatwari, Sainj, Malla, Athali Dilsaud and Chamkot, are quite close to the road. In the Assiganga Cluster, seven villages were chosen: Gajoli, Seku, Agoda, Dasda, Dandalka, Bankholi and Nau Gaon. These lay close to the Sangam Chatti Area which is 15 kilometres away from Uttarkashi, the main town, and would take a sturdy trek uphill.
of two to three hours. The Upla Taknore border villages enroute to Gangotri consisted of: Sukki, Jhala, Jaspur, Purali, Dharali, Bagori, Harsil and Mukhwa (see Figure 10.1 for details).

The initiatives

Participatory assessments became the basis for commencing the work as it meant that the results could be shared at once and action initiated by community members. These formed the basis of initiating and sharing responsibility for action. Macchi (2011) and Dominelli (2012) emphasise the contextual issues underpinning vulnerability and the need to take account of the institutional and social contexts in developing effective steps to combat extreme climate events. Furthermore, mountain communities are subject to specific vulnerabilities that are both biophysical and socio-economic, and recognise gendered vulnerability (Adger and Kelly, 1999; Brodnig and Prasad, 2010; MacGregor, 2017).

Assessments regarding their livelihoods and how these are being affected by disasters were mapped and analysed in a shared manner. For this purpose, village-level meetings were held at 20 villages with the project team having repeated interactions with them. Rapport was built through the initial interactions wherein field investigators who spoke the local dialect shared the purpose of these interactions and what it could mean for the villagers. They also sought the participation of the village community especially that of the Gram Sabha (which is empowered under the 73rd Act of the Indian Constitution to deal with village-level issues and oversee the implementation of central sector schemes). Village became the basis for interaction – the
minutes of the various discussions held with villagers were taken. This effort was facilitated through a research grant from Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR).

Livelihoods mapping, assessment and interventions

Agriculture and livestock rearing were the major occupations of the villagers in these mountain communities. Thus, the project team focused on understanding the impacts of climate change and disasters on agriculture and the socio-demographic features associated with it. This work entailed holding focus group discussions to understand the gendered nature of agricultural work. While it is well known that women bear the brunt of the work and hold a major share in the agricultural work, there has been difference in terms of how this work pans out in each of these villages, depending on how close their sources of fuel, fodder and water are located to their village and households. The villagers face issues of pest attacks, wild boar attacks and monkey attacks on their fields. There is an increasing tendency to move towards other occupations and abandon agriculture altogether. Disasters in terms of floods and landslides have made this more difficult to practice. The first assessments from seven villages in the Assiganga cluster pointed to dwindling productivity over the years alongside insect attacks. This resulted in seeking the support of the district agricultural department who readily collaborated in participating in a one-day agricultural meeting organised at Gajoli village. Participation at the meeting included around 70 farmers and 25 women’s representatives, facilitating an open discussion on farming concerns, including protection from pest attacks, increasing yields, protecting crops and sharing information on government schemes related to these. Regarding the quality of soil conditions, the Agricultural Department suggested checking soil health conditions. The work initiated was in line with the green social work principles of co-producing solutions (Dominelli, 2012) by engaging scientific experts (here agricultural experts) and local communities in participatory dialogues. The follow-up involved taking soil samples to the Agricultural Department. However, the follow-up did not materialise as desired for a variety of reasons including physical distance and the dominant perceptions about receiving support. These had been shaped by prior experience with NGOs, whose actions of ‘providing material benefit’ nurtured a sense of dependency.

Suggestions arising from the meeting concerned raising vegetables in poly-tunnels to avoid pest attacks. These were taken up in earnest by the project team who explored subsidy-based schemes from the government’s agricultural department. Critical concerns included the government’s inability to reach remote and inaccessible village communities (Assiganga Cluster) and those communities’ incapacity to respond. Other reasons government departments typically gave for their failure included the exhaustion of funds for that year or that their programmes had already reached the required number of participants.

Forest resources are integral to the agricultural work practised in these communities. There are a number of species of plants that are used as fodder, fuelwood and food sources. The communities, especially the women, possess local knowledge related to these. They are also aware of how climate change is affecting these resources much better than the men. The region boasts a substantial presence of medicinal and aromatic plants. The strong presence of the Forestry Department in controlling access to and the utilisation of these resources to prevent commercial exploitation, while retaining its role in auctioning these resources to major Ayurvedic pharmaceutical companies, meant the erosion of community authority. Historically, there has been a tussle for the control and commercial exploitation of these resources between the forest-dependent communities and Forestry Department since British colonial times (Guha, 1991). Numerous community struggles, including violent ones, to wrest their rights from the authorities have led to the recognition of their usufructuary rights to forests. The State Medicinal Plants
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Board and the District Administration promote licensing and training for those farmers desiring to diversify into cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants, actively encouraging such efforts by farmers. The opposite holds for the Forestry Department. Instances of Forestry Department officials harassing these farmers and seizing their produce at the time of harvest and even sending them to prison on the pretext of illegal exploitation of the government’s resources were brought to light during the project’s interactions with the villagers. This led to discussions as to who owns the forests and what is the nature of their ownership. The suggestion of one of the authors to seek a legal basis from the Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (FRA), 2006 to develop their livelihoods. The sanctions of the Forestry Department and the legacy of controlling forests generated from British colonial times impacting upon the regulation of forest-dependent lives, was shared in meetings held with the project team. Green social work encourages local use and ownership of land and its resources and the FRA work restores community ownership of natural resources.

The project team then began to disseminate the FRA in earnest. To access rights under this Act which came into force in 2008, there are set procedures, which begin with the formation of the Forest Rights Committees under an open Gram Sabha Meeting (composed of all adults 18 years and over). The constitution of the committee ensured that the voices of those traditionally marginalised in decision making were represented by mandatorily requiring that one-third of the committee members was composed of women, one-third from tribal communities (if any) and one-third from the remaining villagers. Requiring a specific gendered representation will ensure that their voice is heard. Further as per the FRA, the traditional rights of usage of forests are assured unhindered only when the claims for individual rights and community rights are submitted with evidence to the Sub-Divisional Level Committee (SDLC). The SDLC is one of the three tiers for the implementation of the FRA, the other two are the District Level Committee (DLC) and State Level Monitoring Committee (SLC). The work could be described in these broad steps, sometimes overlapping with each other: dissemination and formation of Committees for Forest Rights; evidence gathering for forest usage at village level including official documents such as working plans and revenue records; resolving forest usage disputes between contiguous villages; preparation of claim documents; submission of claim documents to the Sub-Divisional Level Committee; engaging with government officials at the SDLC and DLC. While these appear to be neat steps, in accessing rights, the work entailed tremendous efforts by both the project team and villagers. In line with the green social work model, the work entailed building capacities among both project staff and communities, especially in understanding and developing confidence in accessing these governance structures to safeguard their rights. The project team partook of training at Bilaspur (Chattisgarh) to acquire a first-hand understanding of these.

This meant understanding the various procedures in accessing rights under the FRA and disseminating it to the village communities through a series of community-based workshops, focus group discussions and wall posters with clearly written messages. Many villagers questioned their powerlessness vis-à-vis the Forestry Department. A major concern expressed often was how to secure the Forest Department’s agreement. Developing village community confidence in having their rights of usage respected was a major challenge. This was slowly overcome as continuous interactions and sharing success stories from other states where the FRA was implemented were undertaken in the village gatherings and through the Bhagirathi Jan Samvad, the project newsletter. Evidence of customary usage of the forest resources was also collected in each village with women as local knowledge providers. Archival records were sought from both the Revenue and Forest Departments to be used as evidence for claiming the rights of usage of these forest resources. Evidence of usage was also collected in each village. The Act stipulated
that older people’s statements duly approved by Gram Sabha could be cited as evidence of usage, as they would know how their community has been using the forests. Further evidence of usage available at village level (collecting receipts of usage permitted by government officials including the Forestry Department) or any receipts of paying fines for infringement were also collected for each of the villages. The FRA stipulates that evidence in the form of government documents, revenue records and working plans which speak of the usufructuary rights of communities could be utilised; this evidence was sought among the archival records of the Forestry Research Institutes at Dehradun and the Forest Training Institute at Haldwani. Further delineating the community claims through GPS marking was another task accomplished with the support of the project team. Also, the FRA resource persons from Maharashtra and Himachal Pradesh who had positive experience of realising people’s rights under the FRA were invited to share their success stories at various meetings both at village level and at a larger meeting with representatives of the Forestry Rights Committees (FRCs) at Uttarkashi.

Of the 18 FRCs that were formed in the 20 project villages, five have been able to follow the necessary procedure to submit the claim documents to the SDLC. Inspired by these developments, one more village contacted and consulted the project team to help support its claims to dwelling in the forest land under the FRA, resulting in the submission of the required documents. Recently our effort has brought to light that there has been no SDLC meeting at Bhawari Block since the FRA came into existence. This exposes a serious lack of concern regarding the implementation of the FRA by government officials. Its realisation carries a strong possibility of increasing villagers’ stake in the forest and ensuring ecological and intergenerational sustainability, issues inherent in green social work approaches to post-disaster reconstruction (Dominelli, 2012). Increasingly, as a modernising state being driven by a development agenda, the state’s proclivity to protect natural resources is diminishing. The ruling of the High Court of Uttarakhand to treat Ganga and Yamuna as living entities and also the water streams, forests and meadows fuels hope that communities’ concerns related to their rights and stakes in protecting and accessing forests will be realised (Livelaw Network, 2017).

Disaster mapping, assessments, preparedness and organisation

Assessments also covered disaster preparedness, as advised by green social work. These entailed mapping physical vulnerability areas within and around the villages and preparing action plans for dealing with these. The actions were shared within the Gram Sabha and resolutions were passed regarding mitigation actions which allocated responsibility with either the local administration or the villagers. Accordingly, action was taken to submit request letters to improve the administration. Some of the actions initiated were the construction of a cut-off pathway between Chamkot village and Dilsor village to prevent landslides protect water sources, protective walls around the gullies/streams and pathways. It also included identifying potential landslide zones and sending information to and requesting action from the authorities. Many small bridges were washed away in the Assiganga cluster of villages. This required action from the authorities. These issues were highlighted through appeals for action to the authorities duly endorsed by the Gram Sabha and items in the Newsletter Bhagirathi Jan Samvad, in the local language Hindi, which was circulated to both civil society and the administration. Some impacts included pathways being built, especially between the Dilsor and Chamkot villages; water points at Dilsor village were repaired; and sanctioned bridges across Bhagirathi at Chamkot and Athali were raised with the authorities. During the June 2013 disaster the bridge connecting the villages of Chamkot and Athali disappeared when the highway was washed away. Before the bridge and highway were rebuilt, the authorities sanctioned the use of a trolley to ferry people across the river. However
this entailed great difficulties as a trolley had to be pulled with strong iron ropes. Doing this could be particularly difficult when a sick person had to be taken to hospital. Also trolleys could not ferry villagers' animals across even if they needed veterinary services, thereby requiring villagers to incur huge costs if they had to pay veterinary officials to visit them. The trolley system to ferry people is commonly adopted by the administration whenever they must provide quick relief and arrange some form of transport. Trolleys are never a preferred mode as it means that one needs to crouch or sit in the trolley and have strong arms to pull the iron ropes to propel oneself forward. These difficulties mean that sick, older people or young people cannot use the trolley without the help of others. Furthermore, many loads had to be carried out from the road head in Bazar to the village to fetch goods to meet daily requirements. All these had to be carried in the trolley which meant delays and waiting. Also, the ropes need to be greased regularly to run smoothly, but usually they were not. In Chamkot, a groom’s wedding party had to cross over in a trolley, making several trips until the entire group could reach the village, evoking comic scenes. The transport of goods to and fro by trolley causes delays and becomes burdensome. Now that that bridge has been built, it has been easier for the villagers to commute. Issues of connectivity affect the daily routines of villagers and can increase their vulnerability, which can be reduced through effective post-disaster responses to restore communication and connectivity as advocated by green social workers.

The disaster had major impacts on livelihoods based on subsistence agriculture. The villagers grew potatoes which they transport to the lower hills. The assessment pointed out that pathways from the Assiganga villages were destroyed during the 2012 floods when the Assiganga River also washed away a mini-hydropower plant that was built close to its banks. The main marketplace serving 15 villages at Sangam Chatti was affected as a major portion was submerged by the river. The villagers’ livelihoods depended on the pathways connecting them to the Sangam Chatti area which is 15 kilometres from Uttarkashi main town. The villagers depend on these fragile pathways to ferry goods and services to and fro. Asadi Aloo (the potato grown during the rainy season) is harvested in late August and September, and has been a major crop that villagers rely upon for their incomes. Standing water on their lands arising from the incessant rains of June 2013 prevented them from retrieving their crops. However, even harvested crops could not be transported to Uttarkashi due to the damaged pathways.

The bridge connecting pathway to Agoda village from Sangam Chatti was also washed away. Replacing it was taken up in earnest, but the new bridge was destroyed by the next rainy season. Another bridge has been constructed subsequently. Participatory assessments were initiated by the project to highlight community grievances and find facilities for storing food grains in their own villages. Doing this required submitting resolutions from Gram Sabha to the administration. Part of the assessment included the identification of the ‘landslide zones’, where cracks were appearing on the hillsides, and how these were affecting villagers’ shelter, given the threat of rocks and debris falling on their houses, making it dangerous to live there. This was a particular hazard in Bankholi, Dasda and Dandalka. The project team and villagers mapped these hazards and followed up on issues with the administration, giving green social workers an advocacy role.

Major issues related to compensation for losses suffered, especially the loss of crops and cattle, emerged. Lack of clear guidelines for assessment and difficulties in reaching villages to make loss assessment during disasters led to many compensation claims being rejected. Sometimes, low values are placed on losses suffered and paltry amounts were offered along with associated costs for processing. Discussions with villagers revealed that asset mapping had to be undertaken with each individual household to enable their claims to be certified by the Pradhan (elected village Head as per the 73rd Amendment), to legitimise their asset status. Certified asset assessments could be leveraged to claim insurance or to estimate losses and determine compensation because
these assessments were more reliable and transparent. Accordingly, all the 20 villages compiled Asset Registers. Having been duly certified by the Pradhan, each household and the Gram Panchayat were given a copy.

Issues related to losses suffered due to lack of transportation, especially in the apple belt of the eight villages of Upla Taknore region, and growing demand for cold storage were also shared with the government in a report. The long-standing demand of the apple growers in these eight border villages has had some results because cold storage is being developed in the region. In the village of Dhaaali in the Upla Taknore region (border villages close to Gangotri pilgrim centre), the Kheerganga stream washed away farmlands and toilets constructed on either side of its banks. A major demand for walling the embankment to prevent further erosion led to the construction of a wall which was begun in 2014 and is now completed. Bagori village was affected by the mountain stream, Purkha Nala. This flooded and the ensuing volumes of water destroyed fields. The village now has protection walls. Consistent efforts by the project team and villagers enabled them to demand the requisite amount to be sanctioned for the Gram Sabha to undertake these works.

**Working with committees**

To provide a forum to raise the collective voice of the villagers on disasters and their concerns related to preparedness on various fronts with government officials, a joint meeting of 66 villages affected by the disaster was called for. The meeting took place on 30 October 2015 at Bhatwari, the Block Headquarters. The villagers articulated critical issues and concerns. The meeting involved a fair representation of women. The larger meeting formed a coordination committee with the backing of the villagers to speak on disaster preparedness with one voice. In December 2015, a committee to work at the cluster level was formed with the cooperation of the 20 villages at Uttarkashi. However, the mode of representation for this committee has thrown up major dilemmas like how are the members to be chosen, on what basis? It was then realised that such a committee had to be built from the bottom-up instead of relying on those traditionally seen as representing villagers’ interests. This required working to initiate village-level disaster preparedness and response teams/committees. Inclusivity and bottom-up approaches are encouraged by green social work (Dominelli, 2012).

Village-level disaster committees had already been formed by the government with some of the village governance council members and other officials who were the village contact persons. However, these village communities had not been trained on disaster preparedness. During December 2015, the project team sought answers from the district administration. In January 2016, the government initiated the process of seeking expressions of interest and giving disaster preparedness training to villagers with the help of local NGOs. Since committees had already been formed at the behest of voluntary organisations at the village level (with abysmally low training aspects), the duplication of efforts was avoided by not forming yet another committee at this level. Work with these members continued at the village level and during the forest fires in March 2016. The villagers of Chamkot and Athali informed and worked with the Forestry Department in stopping the fire from spreading. Each collective effort is intended to build more effective efforts in preparing for and responding to future disasters.

Responding to the needs of the villagers, building on their skills and working with the administration were undertaken alongside disaster preparation initiatives. The newsletter which ran 12 issues from the second year of the project highlighted significant progress in these areas. Villagers’ key concerns were associated with disaster preparedness, livelihoods and forest rights.
The rationale for the initiatives of the project team has always been to build collaborative efforts, share information, listen carefully and prepare to work with government officials. Government has the reach and resources to reach the remote communities. The project team’s principle aim has been to prepare communities for their rightful share in decision-making and ensure access to these. The combined efforts of the civil society, government and communities will enable for a just and sustainable development (Dominelli, 2012).

Some important insights and lessons

Selection and preparation of personnel

Field investigators were selected from the local communities. However, it was soon realised that their involvement has both positive and negative connotations. In the highly entrenched caste system, social networks are formed mainly on caste lines. Identity issues affected the method and outcome of participatory assessments. Social groups perceive and relate to each other differently. Consequently, villagers’ familiarity with the caste identity of local researchers through their surnames impacted upon their willingness to share information. Cultural sensitivity is an issue in green social work, but changing existing social relations is for villagers to initiate (Dominelli, 2012).

The culture impact on the villagers’ work and migratory patterns

Culture is an important aspect of community development (Dominelli, 2012). The planning of the work had many ups and downs as pathways remained blocked, especially in the Assiganga cluster where villagers could not be reached. Many of the households had migrated to the Channis (the higher altitudes where they move with their animals in the summer and farm from June to October). This absence affected significant numbers of villagers and their absence posed problems for village gatherings when Gram Sabha meetings were called. The eight villages in Upla Taknore, the high-altitude villages near Gangotri, practice transhumance. Thus, these villagers live in a high-altitude village for the six months of summer and move down to villages at lower altitudes close to the district headquarters during the winter months, moving their schools with them. As all meetings must be held during this short time-span, opportunities for holding community-level meetings and initiatives are restrained. The wedding season dominates March and April, so villagers are busy visiting relatives and attending weddings. This also curtails collective efforts. That young people leave their villages in search of jobs in the plains, leaving older people to practice agriculture, limits their involvement in disaster preparedness. Split families exist in Chamkot and Athali. Older parents remain in the village while the rest of the family lives across river in the Bazar (market area) to pursue their children’s education. Fewer ‘family hands’ to work on agriculture pose concerns about losing the ‘culture of agriculture’.

Complexity of civil society interventions and the location of work

Civil society initiatives have enabled a culture that is at once seen as ‘receiving’ and not participating. There are narratives of disaster relief efforts and cases where the relief materials were distributed many times to the same individuals and families. There have been number of agencies working in the communities. A strong NGO presence in these communities results in two to three being in the villages. However, these NGOs have inculcated a strong receiving attitude
rather than promoting participation. The Uttarakhand Livelihood Support Programme (ULSP) was initiated with substantial World Bank funding for community mobilisation. The presence of multiple agencies, all catering to the same village community with no coordination between them, means that everyone is busy completing their targets. While the climate promotes ‘receiving’ aid, the struggle for justice or rights under the FRA has invoked queries as to why the project team is pursuing participatory goals rather than focusing on ‘distribution’. It took almost a year to clarify and make the communities understand that the project work would require strong participation from them. Having multiple players in the civil society arena, offering different services under diverse motivations creates their own challenges.

Work at the Gram Sabha level is essential

The local system of governance under the Constitution of India is secular. However, it is caught in a highly skewed social space that practices hierarchy. This entails challenges in making the Gram Sabha a practicing democratic institution. The key to community development in these mountain communities is strengthening democratic processes at the Gram Sabha level. This entails capacity-building for decision-making, encouraging a democratic spirit, developing a climate for sharing and collaboration between and among villagers. Democratic processes need to become daily routines.

Working with government officials

In accessing services and ensuring rights, working with government officials is necessary. Success in enlisting local administrative support is always precarious, as matters change a lot. The disaster preparation work or livelihoods related Forest Rights Work brings in a number of challenges and Eureka moments. There have been frequent changes to the district administrative leadership, with the work of verifying claims under the FRA pending at the Sub-Divisional Level. Thus, advocacy and lobbying for rights with the duty bearers is crucial and has to be undertaken simultaneously.

Conclusions: theory and practice innovations, current and future, and new research questions

This work raises critical questions for the future. These relate to theoretical questions about governance and participatory processes – instilling a democratic spirit and the right to receive services efficiently. How is it possible that villages with a history of protest from British times to the Chipko movement now accept this governance or the lack of it without raising a voice or fighting for their rights to forests and protecting their farms? During relief distribution after the disaster, many villagers participated in a protest march against the unjust distribution of relief. They sought ‘sadak, samman aur suraksha’ (roads, respect and protection), and were clearly against charity. Many villagers rescued pilgrims who were caught in the disaster and provided shelter and food from their own stocks (Nichenametla, 2013). However, once the initial hardships were overcome, there has been a meek acceptance of the situation and no demand for their rights. Is there democratic fatigue? One wonders. And how can a culture of democracy be built in a social set-up that is highly iniquitous?

The Gram Sabha processes following the Panchayati Raj Act require all adult members to participate in village affairs. However, participation is often lacking and the Panchayat secretary (representative of Panchayati Raj Department from state government) whose responsibilities are
to oversee and ensure democratic processes at the Gram Sabha level performs lip service to the idea of participation. Hence, the work of Forestry Rights Committees needs to be watched and hand-holding is required to ensure democratic processes in decision-making. The democratic ethos contrasts with the everyday reality of patriarchy and stark caste hierarchies. Hence, future research could focus on how the democratic processes can be assured and strengthened. How can women’s voices be represented and what mechanisms could be put in place to ensure their participation in the Forestry Rights Committees? Can their participation in household-level work continue alongside their farm work and governance work? What could drive and sustain such participation? Further questions could focus on what mechanisms government must put in place to guarantee forest rights and how these coalesce, contradict or conflict with the other government actions and policies like the promotion of van panchayats (or forest regeneration with funds received from multilateral agencies). Green social workers, with their commitment to environmental justice, can carry this objective forward and simultaneously develop the model further.

References


