

The Dafaalis of Pithoragarh: a young tribe of nature-loving wanderers

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So much to learn and see in nature

The *Dafaalis* of Pithoragarh: a young tribe of nature-loving wanderers

We leave the office and walk up to the local PG (post graduate) college to meet with a few young people. It's a short uphill walk through a bustling market, winding around hilly slopes to eventually reach a small covered pavilion. Just off the road and perched on the side of the mountain is perhaps one of the best views of Pithoragarh city.

But of course, when you live in a valley surrounded by four Himalayan peaks, the views can seem unremarkable. At least, that's what I realised looking at the fifteen or so young men and women huddled together in that pavilion talking animatedly instead. My own attention, however, was sidelined by the fact that one young man in a navy blue tracksuit was clutching a Hindi translation of Ram Guha's *India after Gandhi*. Against his small frame, the 400-page book looked immense!

Manoj and I made our presence felt, as he greeted them and introduced them to me, an unfamiliar stranger who had come all the way from Delhi to meet with them. The beaming smiles told me immediately that Manu *da* was beloved in the community. More curious than shy, they asked me what I was doing there. After learning about my work with young people in other parts of Uttarakhand, they felt comfortable telling me more about their hillside study circle.

As I then learnt, this was just one chapter of the Aarambh Study Circle. The very first chapter had been started by a college senior at Pithoragarh PG College, as a study circle for those interested in learning, reading and perhaps most importantly, preparing for government exams. Of course, most of them wanted a government job - civil services or bharti (defense), invariably. This wasn't surprising. I was amazed to hear that so many students had become interested in participating, that there were now four chapters that met in different parts of the city! They would meet most days after college and talk about current affairs, books they were reading and general knowledge trivia. They'd even spend most of their Sundays and holidays learning and sharing with each other. That's a level of motivation I hadn't experienced myself at that age, or even seen in students their age in other towns and cities.

A tribe of dafaalis

The demographic dividend of youth in the valley

What's different about Pithoragarh city is that there are a lot of young people still around. As a semi-urban centre nestled in the Panchachuli Himalayas, the city has become a rich catchment for families migrating in from villages near and far. Despite its remoteness (Pithoragarh is 11 hours away from the closest railway station), the city has a population of over 56,000 people. Of course, the sheer numbers put immense pressure on the local ecosystem, but we'll get into that a little later. Compared to many other Himalayan cities and villages, where you often see very few young people because they've all migrated out for education or for jobs, there is still a large number of young men and women studying, working or seeking work here.

Pithoragarh is also where the legend of Manu *da*, popularly known as 'Manu Dafaali' in these parts, kicks in. Manu, or Manoj Matwal as is his 'official' name, has had a pretty interesting journey over the last couple of decades. A resident of Pithoragarh itself, he is an ecologist by training. As a child, he could be found by himself at the local

gadhera

(creek), fascinated by the fish; or he'd be found roaming the forests. He was one of the few students of a course in Wildlife Conservation at a nearby college, which confused family and friends as it was a 'strange' career choice. It could be said that he went off the beaten career track himself, which is why today he is able to help so many young people in Pithoragarh chart out their own journeys.

Friend, philosopher and guide to young and old

After an interesting journey, which took him to Dehradun to set up a state office for WWF-India and the coast of Gujarat to work on the conservation of the whale shark, he moved back to his hometown of Pithoragarh to help conserve the forests and environment that had taught him so much.

Founded in 2012, Harela Society believes in creating local archetypes for environmental conservation - simple, replicable steps that support local ecological development through community outreach. The name 'Harela' itself, which stands for 'Hands Applying Reconciliation Ecology through Local Archetypes', has a deeper connotation. In Kumaoni culture, *harela* literally means 'day of green'. Harela is a local harvest festival which marks the beginning of the sowing cycle. Across the region, it is celebrated through tree plantations at a large scale.

The Dafaali life

A tribe of 'dafaalis'

When I first began speaking to youth who volunteer with Harela Society, I was surprised to see that a lot of them had the same last name - 'Dafaali'. That didn't sound like a typical Kumauni name. As it turned out, a

'dafaali'

is someone who 'wanders and learns' in Kumauni. The name connected all these pahadi wanderers who considered themselves part of the same tribe led by their friend, philosopher and guide Manu 'Dafaali'.

When Manoj speaks to young Harela volunteers about the future, he doesn't scare them into believing that the world will end. Nor does he try and soften the blow when it comes to the negative impacts of development on local ecology. He believes that when you talk about conservation, ecology or reconciliation, you aren't doing it for anyone else - for another species, or for some intended profit. Conservation is for your own survival. This becomes even more critical for young people, whose entire lives lie ahead of them. And time is slipping through our fingers like sand. Eventually, all of us have to understand this on an individual, personal level.

The forest fires of 2016

When a massive forest fire broke out in Pithoragarh in 2016, a number of youth volunteers were involved in controlling the fire. This went on for almost a week, until everyone's eyes were watering because of all the smoke and ash - this was a wake up call for everyone, that things were slowly getting out of hand.

This is the theme of Harela. No one is forcing you to save the environment. See the changes happening locally around you, make of them what you will. And if you want to do something about it, Harela is there as a platform for you to participate.

And so, at Harela young people get a space to talk about the issues affecting their local climate, ecology, water and forests. If they want to, they can plan community events such as plantations, clean-up drives, recycling campaigns or forest walks. They can make films about their local environment, and do screenings of those films for the larger community.

A mountain of trash in the mountains

Through these kinds of events and activities, volunteers learn so much more - they learn about working together collaboratively in teams, they learn about contingency planning, they learn about management and responsibility. Professional values which go a long way once they start embarking on their own individual careers. Perhaps some of them will go on to work on environmental issues in a professional capacity. Or maybe they won't - that's not what Harela's objective is, after all.

Nature trails and forest walks

Saving the environment? All change begins from within

Take 19-year old Ankit, for instance. Ankit now lives in Delhi and just released his first studio album. When he first began volunteering with Harela in 2015, he did not know of any other organisation dedicated to working on the environment. He recounts a time 2 years back when he took part in a local clean-up drive. From then on, he participated in bigger events, such as a mega-clean-up with 1200 school students and a team of Harela volunteers, where they collected 5 to 10 tonnes of garbage. Through these experiences, he learnt about his own leadership potential and also realised that he was a 'creative' at heart. Today, he credits Harela with giving him the confidence to pursue a career in music instead of a more 'regular' career. Even in Delhi, he is working to bring the message of Harela to his local society through awareness campaigns on reducing the use of plastic. He also hopes to use his music to talk about these issues.

Everything is connected

It isn't just learning about the environment for these *dafaalis*. While volunteering with Harela, young people learn a lot about their own interests, skills and preferences. Through events at the local schools, Umesh was able to build his own confidence and talk about nature conservation and prevention of forest fires in front of large groups of students. This gave him the confidence in public speaking and helped him polish his own leadership and problem-solving skills. He credits Harela for helping him understand the importance of thinking deeply about a problem before attacking it. He now has his dream job - reading and writing about Pithoragarh's history, culture and wildlife for a local media company set up by yet another *dafaali*, Hemraj Mehta. Hemraj gave up a well-paying job in Delhi to come back to Pithoragarh and set up his own media company, and believes that it was Manu's mentorship that gave him the confidence to do that. Today, his company collaborates with Harela Society for events through photography and videography, and his own team learns about local ecology while working for these events.

There are also volunteers who are much younger, and even more vocal about their thoughts. 8-year old Dishu has been visiting Harela for the last couple of years. When she found out that a *timla* tree (*Ficus auriculata*) belonging to her neighbours was getting felled to construct a boundary wall, she immediately took her father's phone to call 'maamu' (Manoj), and tell him that 'her tree was getting cut'. Manoj tried to explain to her that he had spoken to the local authorities, and since it wasn't a wild tree and was on private property, they couldn't do much. She immediately shot back, 'Why do you have so many people with you at Harela, if you all can't even save one tree?' By the time her maamu had reached her home, she was literally hugging the tree and crying, saying it shouldn't be cut. It worked, and the neighbouring family decided not to get the tree cut down.

Hug a tree today

Other volunteers talk about how their own actions influence their own friends and family. Seeing them carry reusable water bottles or refuse to throw trash on the roads, a few people are sometimes confused and laugh at them. But others begin to pick up on the benefits of making a change at an individual level, and begin to do the same things.

Harela isn't trying to convince people to give up their lives or livelihoods to fight for the environment. Instead, it pushes people to fight for their own survival by changing the smallest behaviours and actions that they can take. Mindsets cannot be changed through force or guilt, but only if individuals themselves are receptive to making that change.

