

OCT 21 – OCT 24 | 2021

# **WESTERN HIMALAYA VIKALP SANGAM**

DEVALSARI, UTTARAKHAND

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# INTRODUCTION

The third Western Himalaya Vikalp Sangam was organised from 21st to 24th October 2021 at Devalsari in Tehri Garhwal, Uttarakhand.

The Sangam was co-hosted by **Kalpavriksh, Titli Trust, Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust, Sambhaavna Institute, School of Rural Development and Environment, South Asian Dialogue on Ecological Democracy, People's Science Institute, Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation, Mool Sustainability Research and Training Center, Jagori Grameen, Beej Bachao Andolan, IABT Foundation, The Himalaya Collective, and Maati Sangathan.**

The Sangam brought together social activists, environmentalists, researchers, and practitioners from across the Western Himalayan states of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand. The participants included people working on social movements, agrarian issues, sustainable rural livelihoods, environmental conservation, community-based tourism, youth issues, and education.

The Sangam was hosted by **Devalsari Environment Protection and Technology Development Society** (also known as **Devalsari Samiti**). Started in 2015, it is a youth collective working towards the preservation of Devalsari's Deodar forests and wildlife. Given the poor implementation of the Forests Rights Act in the state, Devalsari Samiti is working towards providing ecotourism-based alternative livelihood opportunities to community members by setting up homestays and training community nature guides.





# 01 AGRICULTURE



## Reflections

- The limitations of farming in the region are increasing; even farmers are losing their traditional understanding of soil. There is a growing distance between the people and the forest, animals and soil.
- Environmentally, the region has suffered from the loss of common land and semi-pastoral systems. This has had a direct impact on land use and livelihoods in the region.
- There has been a loss in species diversity and water sources in the forests are drying up.

***'To forget how  
to dig the earth  
and tend the soil  
is to forget  
ourselves'***

*M.K. Gandhi*

- Large corporate markets have seeped into the agriculture system. They are unable to handle the cropping diversity as they prefer mass-scale production. Consequently, these forces are shifting cropping patterns, thereby diluting the farmer's agency on what to grow.
- Due to the climate crisis, predictable weather patterns have become unstable and disoriented the farmers' sense of preparation. There has been a massive change in the rain patterns, which are more intense and arriving earlier than expected.
- The riverine systems are being increasingly impacted by the construction of roads and unsustainable waste disposal practices.
- Socially, there has been a loss of a sense of community, and lifestyles are becoming individualistic.
- Traditional farming practices are not being adopted any longer. With this, there has been an erasure of community practices such as grass cutting, tilling the ground, and even music.
- Culturally, there has been a dilution of the *Pahaadi* identity, where farming practices were heard in the songs, and communities held festivals around nature—all of which are slowly dying.
- The younger generations are losing their interest in pursuing agriculture.
- Economically, the motives for farming have changed, and cash crops are becoming central in farmers' decision making.
- At local organic markets, big corporations are buying produce at a large scale for select customers—further increasing the inaccessibility.
- In the Western Himalayas—a unique bioregion—there is immense seed diversity that requires preservation.





## Alternatives

Despite these drawbacks, several alternatives still continue to make efforts to preserve the social, economic, ecological, cultural and political nexus that is unique to the region. It is important not only to save the existing diversity and traditional knowledge but also to strengthen community value and local decision making.

- In Ramnagar, farmers are now deciding their own selling price for their produce to increase their agency.
- In Sult, SHRAMYOG found that many people had left farming due to insufficient earnings. They then decided to work with women farmers to restart agriculture. In an effort to grow local crops, they started with turmeric. They found that there was high curcumin content in the turmeric, which helped in increasing the sale of the produce. They grew from working with 12 villages to 125 villages.
- Vijay Jardhari has recorded the seed diversity and species diversity of the region. He has identified more than 130 types of forest produce that have medicinal properties.



# 02 CLIMATE CHANGE

- Climate change is becoming increasingly disruptive, which can be seen both on a large scale and locally. Farmers have now declared that they can no longer identify weather patterns.
- For 30 years, global politics has been practising political negotiations around climate change. But now, the situation has become far more precarious.
- Global interconnections are often difficult to study and recognise. For example, how has American and European pollution affected the Himalayas?
- Earth systems science has accurately studied the tipping point (or collapse point) of our climate system. We are currently in a stable state, but once we reach the tipping point, we will enter another form of the climate system, one that will be calamitous for human existence.

## Reflections

- Fragile ecosystems need to be understood locally and globally. The impact of losing the Himalayan ice systems (which can be considered the third pole) will be dire, both locally and globally.
- In the Himalayas, there has been a 40 percent decrease in snow coverage. Local efforts can be made to fight this, but the increasing pace of climate-related disruptions may overthrow local efforts.
- There are several false solutions that are diluting the fight against the climate crisis which have very direct impacts on the Western Himalayan region. Reduction in consumption patterns is necessary and missing from the dialogue.
- It is important to recognise that climate change has a disproportionate impact on disempowered citizens. Solutions often focus on the empowered populations, further disempowering vulnerable populations.



- There is a concerted effort by corporations to shift the focus from systemic failures to blaming individuals and holding them responsible for a systemic problem.
- The work done by civil society has definitely reduced the emissions. However, it is still necessary to advocate for larger systemic reductions.

### **Solutions, community responses and action points**

- It is important to understand concepts around climate change and share them with the locals and villagers in the region.
- Currently, Radio Hemvaani, a community radio station in Uttarakhand, is helping counteract destructive development practices by sharing scientific facts about their negative externalities and how they impact the region.
- SHRAMYOG is attempting to use newer forms of knowledge to share the information with different groups in the village—for example, with monthly meetings for their newsletter on rural issues related to the environment.
- A strong civil society network is required so that people can come together and support each other. There is a need to understand the kind of support that is required by local initiatives.
- Changes caused by the climate crisis need to be documented. There is a need to have a collaborative system of functioning between civil society members.
- A long term vision is necessary. But immediate actionable responses are important to begin the processes being discussed. In the face of increasing natural disasters, there is little precautionary work being done, as currently, only reactionary forces are at play. With the spread of technology among the masses, people can now have access to many resources that weren't previously available, which can increase their precautionary capacities. Information-sharing networks can be pivotal in the face of multifaceted challenges.

## 03 YOUTH

Youth migration is a big issue for this region and is intricately linked with education and livelihoods. Uttarakhand is leading in outmigration, but there are similarities in issues faced by youth across the states. After speaking to the local youth and trying to understand the issues they face, five important areas have been identified:

- Education
- Livelihood
- Health and wellbeing
- Digital Access
- Social Inclusion and Cultural Identity

Key points that came out from the discussion on these five areas:

- **Education** needs to provide a localised context for students to be connected with their surrounding wildlife, flora and fauna, culture, and traditional practices. It is important for them to understand their cultural identity and the western Himalayan bioregion.
- Youth in the region do not have sustainable **livelihood** opportunities due to which many of them prefer migrating to cities.
- It is important to consider both curative and preventative **health care**. There are many medicinal plants in the Western Himalayas, and it is important for the youth to bring back and record traditional practices.
- There is a stark difference between rural youth and urban youth who have **digital access**. This, in the context of COVID-19, further depletes their employment opportunities.
- **Social inclusion and cultural identity** of the youth is often in a delicate balance. The youth who leave the region face discrimination and cultural ignorance. When they return, they face a similar problem of having difficulties in adjusting to community practices. They always feel like an outsider which impacts their social life and mental health.

It is important that alternatives work towards tackling the issues faced by youth in a holistic manner.

## Reflections

- It often becomes a status symbol to out-migrate for education. Since the local income is not enough, several parents make attempts to have better earnings to support their children's education. Their lens becomes economic and they start exploiting the river and the forest to procure extra income for themselves.
- It is important to add the opportunity of farming in our schooling system.
- For promoting alternatives, we need to find ways to empower school management communities.
- If we analyse our existing system, under the claim of certified education, these occupational education systems have a reductionist approach towards traditional knowledge. We need to incorporate systems of our traditional knowledge, languages, and important aspects of our culture. Traditional rituals have been influenced by natural systems. Bringing a rational understanding of such rituals into the education system could bring back a deeper connection with nature.

## Solutions, Community Responses and Action Points

- In Kashmir, Irfan Geelani started a campaign called "Birds of Kashmir" based on eco-tourism, drawing International attention. He started programmes called "Birding from Balconies" and "Birding from Backyards" to provide a platform for youth engagement, while also trying to connect it with livelihood opportunities.
- In Ladakh, a children's book titled "Jewels of the Mountains", which speaks about the local ecology, wildlife, and conservation is rejuvenating a curiosity for nature among children.
- A programme called 5 KM Walk is run by certain schools around Dehradun, where students document species (or life processes) that they see on their walk, which then becomes part of the syllabus to be taught to students, helping them connect with scientific and traditional processes.
- In certain regions like Zaskar in Ladakh, there is a lack of knowledge on governance, legalities, and conservation. A think tank or a bonding agent is required in these spaces to empower them.



# 04 TOURISM



- Tourism is an important lifeblood of the Himalayan economy, but the increasing rate of mass tourism is threatening the ecological balance of the region.
- The ever-growing trajectory of this form of tourism can be seen with the example of Ladakh. More than three lakh people visit Ladakh every four to five months and are now threatening the exhaustion of local resources.
- Mass tourism has brought about an inferiority complex in some Ladakhis. This is often juxtaposed with the revival of reverence for Ladakhi culture among its people.
- Seeing this as a business opportunity, many outsiders are starting tourism businesses in Ladakh, which is reducing opportunities for local youth to create livelihoods out of tourism.
- The general understanding of “responsible tourism” is to create better-living conditions for the local communities and to create better destinations for the tourists themselves. An important dimension missing from the discourse is wildlife conservation and habitat conservation.

- The political change in Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir—alongside the policy in Jammu and Kashmir to sell land to outsiders now—is also threatening livelihoods and ecology in the region.
- In Spiti valley, too, locals are facing challenges because of outsiders coming in and taking over their livelihoods.
- In Jammu and Kashmir, after the removal of Article 370, the conditions of work have been affected. There is growing fear due to the lack of restrictions and people entering in an unmitigated manner (due to the land being sold to outsiders).
- In Uttarakhand, conservation laws are being further diluted. The attention has moved from environmental protection to livelihood opportunities.
- In all four states, responsible tourism and ecotourism are largely missing from the policy dialogue.
- Tourism only supports six percent of people in Jammu and Kashmir. It affects the water and wildlife, disrupts local livelihoods, and affects their culture. Understanding the carrying capacity and putting regulations in place becomes very important.

## **Solutions, Community Responses and Action Points**

- Responsible tourism should be sustainable, allow for local autonomy, and have a slow growth process, an example of which is homestays.
- Securing tourism-based livelihoods for local communities can naturally put some checks in place. Since their source of livelihood depends on the ecology, they become actively involved in nature conservation. Their livelihoods are intertwined with their community's practices (with homestays, for example) and therefore, they ensure that the community isn't disturbed by tourists.
- Policies need to advocate for conservation and secure local livelihoods by favouring community-owned and community-run activities.
- In order to avoid over-exhausting local resources, there need to be community-led committees that are keeping a check on tourism.
- We have to incorporate the Rights of Nature in our understanding of tourism. Nature should not be seen with utilitarian values.
- Carbon emissions should also become a parameter keeping sinkage and limits in the equation. This can become an important parameter in quantifying the limits to tourism.
- Trash is another issue related to tourism. Responsible tourism also involves managing our trash with utmost responsibility.



## Alternatives

- The Snow Leopard Conservancy Trust in Ladakh has been promoting responsible tourism in the remote locations of Ladakh through their programme "**Himalayan Homestays**". The money garnered from tourism has actually reduced instances of poaching of snow leopards.
- In Tosamaidan, community-based tourism is being promoted and they have trained over 70 local nature guides. Ethnic Kashmiri arts, crafts, and local cuisines are also being promoted. Cooperatives are being planned to help maintain these processes.
- In Khajuraho, EQUATIONS facilitated self-help groups to set up homestays. They also set up a multi-stakeholder platform to protect the historical locations and heritage sites from rampant tourism.





# BIODIVERSITY HERITAGE SITE STATUS

The **Devalsari Samiti** applied for Biodiversity Heritage Site (BHS) certification in 2020. 'Heritage' here refers not only to ecology but also to their culture, history, language, festivals, spirituality etc. The aim is to reclaim the land ownership in the hands of the community and to have shared accountability of their flora and fauna. Currently, the proposal has been lying with the State Biodiversity Board for several months. If the BHS application is approved, then the community can work towards maintaining the local ecology and generating sustainable livelihoods. With BHS, the local community becomes central in decision-making regarding their forest, and cannot be bypassed.



# 06 FIELD VISIT



On the final day of the Sangam, the group went to visit nearby villages. There, the group spoke to different community members about their lives, and also got a chance to look at traditional grain storage systems.

The group then visited Shridevi Suman Titli Park, which has been proposed by the community as a Biodiversity Heritage Site.

Over the years, due to over-exhaustion of resources in the park, the local biodiversity was at threat. Nobody from the region was able to stop it, as the park's ownership was spread out among five different villages. In an effort to stop the degradation, the Devalsari Samiti took the park under its own jurisdiction. The five gram sabhas came together to make a proposal for the protection of this area.





Earlier, the park was rich in wildlife, and leopards would walk out in the open. The dry areas of the park were habitats for black bears, and there were several kinds of snakes, birds, and butterflies.

This park plays an important role in preserving the rich biodiversity of Devalsari. This is an important area for the preservation of butterflies and birds. There have been several positive changes after the reduction of illegal deforestation and poaching. The forest has been steadily growing back and healing. Recently, an *acrea* moth was sighted here, the first record for Uttarakhand in 150 years, and the first-ever record for Garhwal.



## Annexure: List of Participants

NAME	ORGANISATION
Vijay Pratap	SADED, RISE, and ACTD
Soumya Dutta	MAUSAM, SAPACC
Baba Mayaram	Independent Journalist
Ajay Kumar	SHRAMYOG
Vijay Jardhari	Beej Bachao Andolan
Biju Negi	Beej Bachao Andolan
Rumani Sheth	AVDAZ AGRO
Adarsh Krishnan	AVDAZ AGRO
Rigzin Choral	Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust
Tsewang Namgail	Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust
Kapila Gureja	EQUATIONS
Arun Prasad	Devalsari Samiti
Keshar Singh	Devalsari Samiti
Rajesh Kumar	Devalsari Samiti
Lobzang Wangtak	Zanskar Conservancy Movement
Naveen Chandra Upadhyay	Camp Hornbill
Shaikh Ghulam Rasool	SRDE and Tosa Movement
Ashwini Shah	Travellers' University
Deepa Kaushlam	People Science Institute
Mohan Chandra Pandey	Corbett Gram Vikas Samiti
Rajesh Bhatt	RAINBOW, Titli Trust
Manohar Singh	EcoHarryMans Homestay
Rajendra Singh Negi	Radio Hemvaani
Ashish Kothari	Kalpavriksh

Shrishtee Bajpai	Kalpavriksh
Upamanyu Das	Kalpavriksh
Vasudha Varadarajan	Kalpavriksh