



A mountaineering expedition into the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve revives the debate on ecotourism and people's rights over forests.

SHROUDED IN CONTROVERSY

NITIN SETHI looks into the issues raked up by the trek

PHOTOGRAPHS: NITIN SETHI / CSE

A SUPPOSEDLY scientific expedition into the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve (NDBR) has stirred the minds of people in Lata village of district Chamoli, in Uttaranchal. They say the expedition was a farce. They claim it was a surreptitious attempt to open the region to high-end tourism with tour operators and touts in the cities minting money at the expense of local communities. The Bhotias of Lata and nearby villages refuse to be sold down the river by the unholy nexus of politicians, bureaucrats and business persons.

"We lost out in 1962 when the India-China war put an end to cross-border trade — then our economic mainstay. In 1982 the government declared the region a national park, claiming excess tourism had ruined the region. We lost rights over the *bugyals* (high altitude pastures) and forest produce — our main source of livelihood. Now the government wants to hand over the forests to the tourist operators and touts of Delhi. We will not be duped a third time over," says Dhan Singh Rana, *pradhan* of *gram sabha* Lata (village panchayat of Lata).

It is the Indian Mountaineering Foundation (IMF)-led recent expedition to the core of the NDBR that has stirred up the angst of the region into active protest.

Bal Singh, 56, sitting at his roadside hut on the banks of the silt-carrying, tumultuous Dhauli Ganga river in Lata, says "We stand guard. We won't let any one, such as the IMF, turn the reserve into one's personal fiefdom. How can they walk in and mint lakhs in the name of conservation and ecotourism, while our children remain porters and manual labour for these tour operators." He wants a life of pride. Pride, which he believes, doesn't come from accepting government doles or from working as porter to expeditions arranged by Delhi-based touts. His livelihood, he says, he wants to earn working as the tourism manager of NDBR. And it is a hope etched with a mix of anger in the hearts of many others in Lata. The entire village of Lata is seething with anger ever since the IMF expedition walked through the village to the core of the reserve.

On June 3, 2001 when Harish Kapadia, team leader of the IMF expedition landed at Lata, looking to hire porters, the villagers, to put it mildly, were surprised. The last expedition to the

reserve, one by the Indian army and including a number of scientists, had been allowed way back in 1993 (see box: *Manager of hope*). Ever since, no one had ventured inside the core of the sanctuary. Kapadia told the gathered villagers gathered at Lata that he was leading a government team trying to assess whether NDBR should be opened for local people or not. Villagers gladly agreed to be porters to the expedition, which promised money as well as a better future. But a haggling match ensued, with Kapadia and his team trying to lower porters' charges. Negotiations ended in half a day with Dhan Singh refusing to play what he calls the role of a *bicholia* (middleman). The episode created bad blood between the villagers and the expedition members. Seeds of doubt were sowed in Dhan Singh's and other village elders' minds.

The expedition lasted about 25 days. During these 25-odd days stories filtered down to the village from the trekking party. Stories, which made the villagers question — how could professional mountaineers enter the core under the garb of conducting scientific research when they, the traditional right-holders were not allowed to even set a step in? Who would finally benefit from this and any future expedition —

mountaineering institutions, documentary makers, the forest department, touts, tourist operators or those who have for years been alienated from their own land by the government?

'Scientific' expedition

Documents in government records reveal the expedition's actual mandate and the real picture. IMF had moved the proposal before the Union ministry of environment and forests (MEF) and the Uttaranchal government to conduct a scientific expedition to the NDBR. The proposal document reportedly sent by the IMF to the MEF details the team's claims to undertake 'scientific' enquiry. It says the team would ascertain

- whether any 'destruction' had taken place after the closure of the sanctuary;
- whether the total closure had been beneficial to the growth of the natural resources;
- whether there have been any encroachments;
- whether the sanctuary is 'strong enough' to be opened to trekking and climbing activity. On the basis of above, the document says, the IMF team would draw a management plan for the reserve. Furthermore, the document says the team would, besides carrying out other research,
- estimate the levels of utilisation of plant and animal resources by locals on a regular and seasonal basis using transects, plots and rapid sampling;
- study the impact of



We will not be duped by tourist operators using ecotourism as a garb to make profits
 — DHAN SINGH RANA
gram pradhan, Lata

radiation on plant life; ● draw permanent transects for the monitoring of the snow leopard and its primary prey species; ● study the impact of global climate change on the five glaciers in the region.

All of this in less than a month's time, while climbing the treacherous route of NDBR — sounds Herculean. Quite predictably, precious little of the so-called research was ever carried out. In fact, a member of the expedition, wishing to remain anonymous, admits, "Besides the minimal glaciological research, nothing else was even attempt-

ed. It was a sightseeing adventure for some and a business trip for others. There weren't any scientists on the team, besides one, to carry out research in the first place."

Rupin Dang, a key member of the expedition, also admitted at a public talk that the 'scientific team' had not carried out any scientific baseline surveys or transect studies. It had only looked at the 'general' condition of the biosphere reserve, he told. To prove his point he showed a picture of two *bharal* skulls as evidence of poaching. Wildlife experts dismissed the so-called proof as a gimmick. One, they opine, *bharal* is not the poacher's target in the region. It is the musk deer. And even if a poacher does catch a *bharal*, he won't leave the skull with the horns behind, they say. The sole 'scientific' proof of poaching presented by Dang shredded to pieces, the experts ask who were the scientists in the expeditions capable of researching impact of closure on the ecology, flora and fauna? Dang claims he was one of them.

The very same 'scientist' Rupin Dang is accused by the forest department and the villagers who acted as porters, of stealing two *bharal* skulls and some species of plants from the core — an illegal activity. The forest guards who accompanied the team also claim that Dang picked up a sample of musk deer's

MANAGER OF HOPE

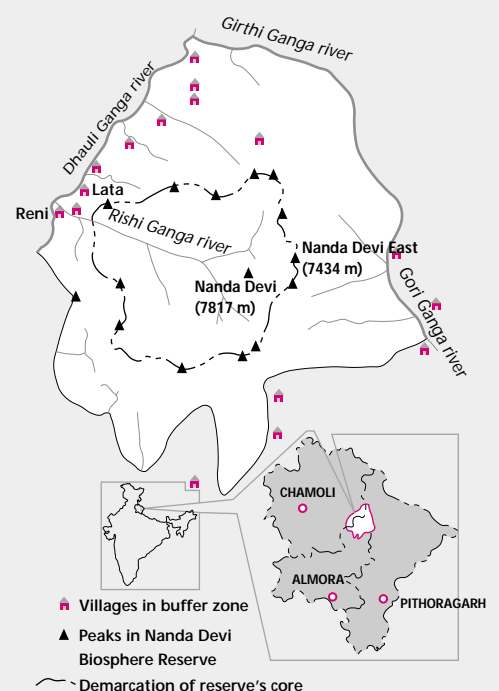
DEWAN SINGH AGE 95 VILLAGE LATA



He remembers accompanying the last expedition to Nanda Devi peak, the country's second highest peak, which falls within the Nanda Devi Biosphere reserve (NDBR). Today, the Union ministry of environment and forests (MEF) has to clear all ventures into the core of the reserve. The region, demarcated as a national park in September 1982, is the habitat of the musk deer, the snow leopard and the Himalayan *tahr*. Incidental, as it maybe for the MEF, 17 villages also fall in the buffer. Lata is one of them.

Creation of the national park took away their traditional rights of grazing in the bugiyals (high altitude meadows) and collection of herbs and medicinal plants. In 1988 the 624.62 square kilometres of the national park was declared core of the NDBR with an additional 1,612.12 sq km demarcated as the buffer. The entire economy of the region collapsed in a heap. Livestock, which had come to be a mainstay of the economy of the region, reduced to less than half for lack of grazing access. On paper they were offered compensation, most of which is still to arrive at their doorstep. The affected villages, which had once led the Chipko movement in 1970s, cracked under the pressure and slowly decayed, becoming dependent on government doles, marginal farming, manual labour and occasional smuggling out of medicinal plants and rarely, poaching. Occasional trekking expeditions to the buffer helped supplement their meager incomes. Dewan Singh's lenses may be cracked but he has a clear vision for tomorrow — that of Lata's people managing ecotourism in the biosphere reserve.

Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve



skin and shot pictures of at various locations along the trek to give 'evidence' of poaching. Senior forest officer of the Uttarakhand cadre laughs off the claims of scientific enquiry by the expedition, "They never meant to carry out any research in the first place, hence they had no qualms proposing whatever they felt like. The expedition looks like a team of businessmen on a reconnaissance mission for new business opportunities," he says on conditions of anonymity.

The team was made up of, besides others, Harish Kapadia — member of IMF and mountaineer; Rupin Dang — director of a documentary-producing private company, which now has sole rights over all footage on video and still images snapped during the tour — a very saleable product, hint some wildlife experts and sources in the MEF; Motup Chewag — a private tour operator and mountaineer; Anand Pendhakar — assistant editor with a portal called *indiaabazaar.com* and part time 'environmentalist'; and Sarfraz Hussain — glaciologist at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

The expedition report, finally submitted by the IMF to the MEF and the state government after much delay has not been made public, but reportedly advises, on the basis of research carried out, the opening of the biosphere reserve to tourism. The director of IMF is unable to explain why a piece of scientific research cannot be made public. M K Sharma, additional inspector general of forests (AIGF) in the MEF, says, he will not make it public until and unless he has read it thoroughly. Does the MEF wish to edit it before going public? A S Negi, chief wildlife warden of Uttarakhand, has reportedly rejected the report as not worth deliberating upon and asked for a team of real experts to look into the matter.

So who chose the present team and who cleared the IMF proposal? No one wants to take responsibility for the expedition today. Questions in the media as well as the parliament about the trek has made everyone run for cover. Dang refuses to talk to *Down To Earth*. M K Sharma, additional inspector general of forests (AIGF) in the MEF says, "The state government took the decision to let the trek go. MEF only advised. The chief wildlife warden issues the final orders." Principal secretary in the state govern-

ment of Uttarakhand, R S Tolia, on the other hand, says, "We were not asked for any permission. We were simply told by the MEF that the trek was on. We were asked to send a state government representative with the team. That we did. The chief wildlife warden has the final say on such matters."

The chief wildlife warden, A S Negi, incidentally, was never party to the discussions held in Delhi on the subject. He was sent a government order informing him that the IMF's proposal had been accepted. He simply complied. "Influential people — members of IMF — were lobbying for the proposal. Why else should an expedition by the Indian

IMF charges US \$3,000 for treks to over 7,000 m, besides making money out of renting equipment.

Real ecotourism

Sunil Kainthola, of Janadhar, Dehra Dun-based non governmental organisation, suggests, "Why can't the people be allowed to manage tourism in the region? They have a plan. The government should provide the capital. They'll do a better job — maybe set up an example for the entire Himalaya-based tourism."

Dhan Singh Rana adds, "The forest department has made thieves out of us in our own backyard. Now they want us

The semi-literate youth of Lata is today confined to the role of porters and guide. For lack of any other work, they agree to carry over 40 kilogrammes of weight for a measly Rs 175 per day, travelling over 15 kilometres of hilly terrain at more than 3,000 metres



army have to wait six months for clearance while M K Sharma, the AIGF, assures clearances to the IMF in matter of few days?" comments a senior bureaucrat in the MEF. But N N Vohra, president of the IMF and a retired senior IAS officer brushes it all off, saying, "All these accusations are politically motivated."

Mountaineers and managers

But the motivation is purely business. For a recent expedition to the reserve by a Korean team the IMF charged US \$9,911 as handling charges (The team, it is another story though, was later packed off from the region while trying to enter the core of the NDBR illegally). The amount converts to approximately rupees four lakh. In comparison, an average villager in Lata earns Rs 5,727 per annum from the village ecosystem and Rs 70-200 per day from carrying 30-40 kilogrammes of weight as porter to heights more than 7,000 metres (m).

to beg before the tourist operators to earn meagre amounts. If the NDBR is to be opened to tourism, let the people of the region manage the business and earn off it," he says. And the village has simple solutions in store to make tourism ecologically-sound. They propose that the village houses on lower hills, which remain vacant during summers, be used for accommodation instead of constructing concrete monstrosities; ecological experts be invited to work with villagers to devise routes and methods to minimise ecological impact of tourism and the local community be taught to monitor and study ecology using new methodologies as well be allowed traditional practices. "If my son earns from a legitimate source of income he will neither have to depend upon illegitimate ones, like some of us now, nor wait for the forest guard to distribute doles to subsist on." A plan in hand, the people of Lata wait, rather impatiently though. ■