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A lifeline for villagers

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The Corbett Heritage Trail, which involves locals in managing tourists, is making a difference in Choti Haldwani.

"THIS is the *chaupal* which Corbett Sahib made, where he would help villagers resolve their disputes and problems," said my guide Puran Bisht, as we walked up a narrow path to a raised platform adjoining the compound of villager Trilok Singh. We were in Chhoti Haldwani, just outside the Corbett Tiger Reserve in Uttaranchal. Bisht, a young man just out of college, was taking me through the Corbett Heritage Trail, a path leading through the village and up to the Corbett Museum at Kaladhungi, where the legendary Jim Corbett had once stayed. As I climbed the steps to the *chaupal*, a young girl emerged from an adjacent hut with a muzzle-loader, a gun that Corbett gave Trilok Singh's father, Sher Singh, for defence against wild animals. That was in the early part of the 20th century, when Corbett the hunter was gaining fame for ridding the area of man-eating tigers and subsequently for passionately advocating wildlife conservation.

For the people's welfare

This part of his story is well known. Not so well known, however, are his deeds for the welfare of the people of the area. Chhoti Haldwani itself was a settlement he helped establish, starting with 10-12 families. In 1915, he bought

221 acres for the princely sum of Rs. 1500. From this he rented out plots to these villagers. He assisted in clearing their land for agriculture, providing irrigation (incredibly, the mud and stone-lined canals are still carrying water), helping build a wall to keep animals out of the fields and, in many other ways, helping secure their livelihoods. When he left for Kenya in 1947, Corbett handed over ownership of the plots to the tenant-families. Corbett's motivations for establishing this settlement may have been manifold: carrying on his name (he did not have a son), establishing a model Kumaoni village, and establishing a clear status and identity as a landowner. Such snippets of his life, which introduce us to Corbett the person, are a key element of the Trail. Today the village has over 150 families - about 750 people. But Chhoti Haldwani itself was till recently forgotten and neglected. In 2001, the Centre for Ecotourism (set up by the Uttaranchal Forest Department) began experimenting with three kinds of community-based ecotourism products: trails, camps, and home stays. Chhoti Haldwani was identified for the first. A researcher, Anjali Bhartari, helped provide information and plan interpretative facilities. The Centre organised discussions with the villagers, seeking their opinion on tourism ventures linked to Corbett's memory. Training sessions were organised, in which village youth were taught the basics of visitor management and given insights into Corbett's life. Six of those who took part went on to become tourist guides. In 2003, a proper path was laid out through the village, providing snippets of Corbett's story on signboards in English and Hindi. In 2006, United Kingdom's Minister of Environment and Climate Change inaugurated a renewed trail. "This is not only a tourism trail. It has actually become a lifeline for villagers," explained Bisht, "including being able to take their agricultural produce out on a cart or tractor, bring provisions in, and taking people to the hospital." As the significance of the village path sunk in, I noticed a group of uniformed people. Bisht explained that it was a team of forest guards from Himachal undergoing training in ecotourism and other aspects. We walked past them, up to a group of women harvesting tomatoes. Another adjacent field had a mix of grains and pulses - the village grows over 60 species of crops.

Home-stays

A man emerged from the house behind the field, and smilingly signalled his

hello to us. Bisht introduced him as Sabir Husain Ansari and mentioned that he had initiated a home-stay arrangement. Ansari welcomed us into the new building he had constructed and proudly showed us a room, which could easily have passed off as a three-star place in a small town. How much did he charge, I asked? The answer was Rs. 150 a night, and Rs. 60 for each meal. Ansari and Bisht then took me to a field in the midst of mango and litchi trees, which they want to develop as a camping site with conference facilities. Earlier on the Trail, Bisht showed me a building under construction - a museum to showcase traditional utensils, handicraft and other items of daily use. Unfortunately, both these projects are going slow, due to lack of funds. I suggested that they approach groups like the WWF for help; but it was already active in distributing LPG connections to poorer households (thereby reducing their dependence on firewood), and training village women in tie-and-dye. The training had obviously paid off, as I discovered when we reached the Trail's culmination at the Corbett Museum. Adjoining the museum, off the Ramnagar-Nainital main road, the Samiti was managing a souvenir shop rented to it by the Forest Department. Here, they sold products of the village including tie-and-dye scarfs and bedsheets, turmeric, maize, chilli powders. The proceeds went back to the villagers, with the Samiti keeping 10 per cent. Several village women had formed the Gajraj group, which coordinated the textile work, and in turn kept the profits from the sales. As I browsed, I was interrupted by a couple of the women who had come to show their latest innovation... a scarf with the footprints of a male and female tiger! Raj Kumar Pande and Mohan Pande, head and secretary of the Samiti, showed me the records of earnings. In the last year, they had each earned between Rs. 8,000 and 20,000, from guiding and from the shop. Proudly they showed the visitor's book, which had entries by the Chief Ministers of Punjab and Haryana, the U.K. Forest Minister, and others, all praising the village's initiative. I asked whether they would consider enhancing visitor value by providing organic food. They had begun to think of it, hesitant because the land had become addicted to chemicals, and the switch would take time. Ansari was going to start with a part of his land, and spread it if successful. They all knew that they could get a higher price for organic produce. As I got up to leave, Pande mentioned a major cause of concern. Ironically, the Heritage Trail had enhanced the value of the land in the village considerably, and people from Nainital wanted to build farmhouses here. Reportedly the price had gone

up from about Rs. 40,000-50,000 to Rs. 5,00,000 a *bigha* ! Already two plots had been sold. The Samiti members were worried that if this continued, the village would become urbanised and dominated by outsiders, losing whatever heritage value it had. The Samiti was considering petitioning the administration to put a ban on sale of village land to outsiders. I asked if the *gram sabha* could not be activated on such matters. It was important, they said, for more villagers to see a value in maintaining the rural life, and getting higher stakes in its heritage value, if sell-out was to be avoided.

Unchecked growth

As I left the village with Corbett's bust staring from behind, I noticed another irony on the road. Every 100 metres or so was the signboard of a tourist resort. Over the last few years dozens of such resorts have come up, all of them cashing in on the national park's tourism value, almost none contributing to the Park's upkeep or to the livelihoods of the villagers around the park. Many villagers had lost their access to the park's resources, and could well have been compensated (some partially, some more than adequately) if they had been facilitated to manage the tourist inflow. The Centre for Ecotourism had at least made a start towards redressing the balance. For further details, contact Puran Bisht, Corbett Gram Vikas Samiti, Chhoti Haldwani. Mobile: 9411375004

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