

Tehri - Garhwal In The Throes Of A Crisis

by ASHISH KOTHARI

TEHRI - GARHWAL is in the throes of a crisis today. The forests of this northern Uttar Pradesh hill district have been sustaining the largely agrarian economy of its people for hundreds of years, but no longer. They now bear a shellshocked appearance. Is it simply the result of an increasing population pressure? Or is there something wrong somewhere else?

A group of 20 students from Delhi found the answer as they trekked through the region, staying with and talking to the Garhwali villagers. It seemed to them to be mainly a case of characteristic shortsightedness on the part of both the residents and the State

Recently a group of high school and college students of New Delhi undertook a *padyatra* through the mountains of Tehri-Garhwal and Uttarkashi districts. They travelled from village to village for two weeks on foot, depending on villagers and forests for food and shelter. Their aim was to study the environmental and social conditions in the area, and they managed to compile a lot of valuable and interesting first-hand information on both these issues.

In this short article one of the *padyatris*, Mr. Ashish Kothari, gives a glimpse of their impressions of the area and the serious situations they discovered. Based on this study, the trekkers have submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister.

Government, a case of indifference towards the crucial relationship between humans and the environment, that has led to this state of affairs.

It would be no hyperbole to state that the Garhwalis' lives depend, in one way or the other, solely on forests. Fuelwood to cook and keep warm in the freezing winter, fodder for their cattle, leaf

compost for their fields, water for agriculture, drinking, and washing, grasses and fibre for baskets, mats and clothes, wood for construction and tools, herbs for healing diseases — all come directly from the forest. As importantly, these forests bind the soil and keep it rich with leaf manure. guard against natural disasters like landslides, floods and droughts.

They are in effect, Garhwal's lifeline.

The forests, in fact, are a lifeline which has been cut up continuously over the last few decades. For the natural broad-leaved or mixed forests of such immense value are diminishing. Hills once covered with a dense mass of oak and rhododendron trees, ferns, moss, and creepers, are now

(Continued In page Seven)

(Continued from page Six)

adorned with huge jagged scars, landslides, and dull, sparse, apologetic stands of the state-ly but useless chir pine. Useless, that is to the Garhwali who must depend on the nearest forest for most requirements. For chir, what with its needle-like leaves which form a thick carpet on the ground and do not allow much undergrowth, offers no fodder, no fertiliser, no food, and fuelwood and construction wood of only a poor quality. On top of that chir forests have little water retaining capacity, so they do not replenish the natural streams which are so abundant in broad-leaved forests. A shortage of all requirements is the tragic result of either deforestation or pine plantation.

Who is to blame? Cer-

Tehri-Garhwal In The Throes Of A Crisis

tainly growing population pressure and an amount of wastage in forest use by the locals is a factor. But they have a legitimate reason — they simply cannot exist without using the forests. Not so the Forest Department's practices of pine monoculture and resin tapping — they are solely guided by economic reasons, ecology and society be hanged. The chir pine is commercially valuable for its timber and resin tap is used in chemical factories. It grows easily and lack of undergrowth makes commercial exploitation profitable. Who cares whether the Garhwali suffers so long as profits keep coming in?

But the Garhwali will

not suffer in silence forever. The enormous socio-economic burdens that environmental degradation has put on the villagers, especially the women who live like widows as their husbands migrate to the plains to work, have incited them to revolt. This is the mass grass-roots uprising that so many people have wished for. This is the 'Chipko' movement.

Progressive in its ideals and in its practices, 'Chipko' is nothing short of an ecological and social revolution. At its forefront are the most exploited section of society — women. They have been instrumental in the protection of the few natural forests which remain, at

times clinging to trees ('Chipko') when axemen approach to cut, or appointing guards themselves and fining local offenders. They have touchingly symbolised their relationship with the trees by tying 'rakhis' on them. But their success story doesn't end at forest protection. Organising themselves into Mahila Mandals, they have collectively dealt heavy blows to liquor drinking by gheraoing, fining, or socially ostracising drunkards. In one village we visited, Khabera, they had forced eighty local breweries to close down! In quite a few villages they have spread the message of cleanliness, often fining litterers. They have also started to fight for their rights in a male-dominated society, a society which binds them to a 16-18 hour workday and

(Continued in page Eight)

Tehri-Garhwal In The Throes Of A Crisis

(Continued from page Seven)

allows only boys to go to schools.

These 'Chipkoists' raised our spirits as much as the dismal scenery downed them. It seemed to us that in an area where the Government is obviously more intent on economic gain than the people's welfare, 'Chipko' was the only sane voice to be heard. It was also obvious that the so-called 'scientific forestry' practiced by the Forest Department was a curse to the region's ecology and people. The forest policy must be reviewed and geared more to local needs than commercial profits. Otherwise 'Chipko' is probably the only solution to Garhwal's problems.
